Companies as Political Actors: Between Market, State and Civil Society

ECTS : 3

Volume horaire : 18

Description du contenu de l'enseignement :

This course explores the growing political role of companies in contemporary societies. Moving beyond the traditional view of firms as purely economic entities, it examines how businesses increasingly shape, contest, and co-produce public goods and collective norms -- from climate governance to digital surveillance, from social inclusion to public health.
Through a series of thematic sessions, students will analyze how corporate strategies intersect with political and societal arenas. The course introduces key frameworks from strategic management, institutional theory, and business & society research, and mobilizes recent debates on corporate power, legitimacy, and responsibility. By engaging with concrete cases and current controversies, students will learn to critically
assess how companies act between market, state, and civil society to address (or sometimes exacerbate) societal challenges. The course combines conceptual framing with active student participation to encourage critical engagement with real-world cases. It is organized around seven sessions: an introductory session presenting key theories of corporate political activity and six thematic sessions addressing major domains where firms act as political actors -- from natural resources and ways of life to data, minorities, and health -- followed by a concluding discussion on corporate governance and democracy. For Sessions 2 to 6, students work in small groups to prepare a short analytical memo on a company case of their choice, connecting it to the weekly theme. These memos serve as the basis for in-class discussion, where students present, debate, and confront perspectives in a semi-structured format inspired by roundtables, stakeholder role plays, or policy workshops. Each session closes with a brief synthesis linking empirical insights to the theoretical frameworks introduced in class. This rhythm allows students to progressively build analytical and critical capacities, while ensuring that the course remains closely anchored in current societal and business issues. This course is on Moodle.
1 (1h30) Introduction: Companies as Political Actors: Forms of Corporate Political Activism
2 (3h) Companies, Natural Resources and the Planetary Commons
3 (3h) Companies and the Shaping of Lifestyles
4 (3h) Data, Surveillance and Digital Power
5 (3h) Companies, Minorities and the Politics of Inclusion
6 (3h) Companies, Health and the Public Interest
7 (1h30) Conclusion: Governing the Political Corporation -- Responsibility, Regulation, and Democracy

Compétence à acquérir :

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Understand the main theoretical perspectives on the political dimensions of business activity (corporate political strategy, non-market strategy, political CSR);
- Identify and analyze how companies influence, and are influenced by, public policies, regulations, and social movements;
- Discuss the implications of corporate political engagement for democracy, legitimacy, and the governance of societal issues;
- Develop a critical and reflective view of managerial responsibility in contexts where firms hold increasing political power.

Mode de contrôle des connaissances :

Component: Weekly memos (Sessions 2-6) 1 Description: 1-page preparatory notes connecting an example of corporate action to the session's theme Weight: **30%**
2 Component: In-class participation and discussion Description: Active and informed participation in class debates, peer exchanges, and critical reflection. Participation includes: asking questions, contributing to debates, engaging with peers, presenting arguments, and reacting to others' points of view. Weight: **50%**
3 Component: Final synthesis essay Description: 2000-word analytical essay integrating course concepts and empirical examples Weight: **20%**
Attendance
Attendance is mandatory. Students are expected to attend all classes, arrive on time, and stay for the entire session. Repeated absences or lateness may affect the final grade.
Class Participation
Active participation is encouraged, as it contributes to making classes more engaging and instructive. Students are expected to

come prepared and contribute thoughtfully to discussions. When participation is part of the course assessment, it is evaluated based on the quality of contributions rather than their quantity.

Exam Policy

Students are not allowed to bring any materials into exams, except those explicitly authorized by the instructor. Unexcused absences from exams or failure to submit assigned cases will result in a grade of zero when calculating final averages. All exams must be submitted at the end of the examination period.

Communication and Grading

All questions or concerns regarding grading or course policies must follow the official procedures. No direct negotiation with instructors about grades or assessments is permitted.

Be aware of the rules in Université Paris Dauphine about plagiarism and cheating during exams. All work turned in for this course must be your own work, or that of your own group. Working as part of a group implies that you are an active participant and fully contributed to the output produced by that group.

Bibliographie, lectures recommandées :

- Mariotti, S. (2025). Firms as Political Forces for Good: Navigating Disorder and State Interventionism in A Multipolar World. Thunderbird International Business Review, 67(6), 783-796;
- Martin, R. L. and Reeves, M. (2022). Strategy in a Hyperpolitical World. Harvard Business Review, 47-52;
- Scherer, A. G., Palazzo, G. and Matten, D. (2014). The Business Firm as a Political Actor. Business & Society, 53(2), 143-156.

Lionel Garreau is an Associate Professor of Strategy at Université Paris Dauphine-PSL. His research examines how organizations articulate meaning and business models, with a particular focus on developing a systemic approach to strategy. He has published in leading international journals such as Strategic Organization, the British Journal of Management, the Scandinavian Journal of Management, and M@n@gement. At Dauphine, he directs the Master 2 Research in Management and the Executive PhD programs, fostering bridges between academic inquiry and managerial practice. He is also the co-founder and co-director of the Systemic Innovation and Management Institute, dedicated to advancing systemic thinking in management and strategy.