The US Political System

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Office Hours (Zoom Meetings): Friday 12:00 – 2:00 or by Zoom appointment
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Course Description
The goal of this course is for students to become critical, sophisticated observers of contemporary American politics. In this course, we will examine the founding and structure of American government, core themes of American political thought, major political institutions, and present-day political and policy issues. Studying the institutions and development of American government, politics and policies will form the basis for 1) understanding the interplay between government, elites, interests, the media and the masses; 2) comparisons among democracies; 3) analyses of key concepts in political thought; and 4) a better understanding of current events and policies. This survey course prepares students for more advanced level courses dealing with American government / politics as well as public policy courses.

Course Requirements
Readings: Class lectures and discussions will go beyond a mere delineation of the basics of American politics. The basics will be applied via discussion to reveal their everyday significance. Each week, readings—many of which assume the reader has some background in the study of American politics—have been selected for their ability to give students a factual overview of that week’s theme. These readings (along with in-class exercises and supplemental readings) will be used to facilitate class discussion. Subsequently, it is important that assigned readings are completed before class. As class will be used to apply the basics of American politics explained in the readings, reading prior to class is essential. Participation in class discussion will be part of the final grade (see below).

Attendance and participation: Regular attendance to lecture and contributions to class discussion are essential and will account for 10% of your grade
• Students are allowed two excused absences. Additional unexcused absences will result in deductions from your course mark. However, since we are [still] in the midst of a pandemic, the university (as do I) encourages anyone not feeling well to stay home and recuperate. In the event, you can’t attend class, I only ask that you let me know. Such absences will count as excused.
• I will lecture for part of the class, but group work and class discussion will also be part of lecture. Participation will be judged more on quality than quantity. Some of the readings can be quite difficult. I will be looking as much at your ability to identify and clearly state difficulties and confusions (your own and those of the author) as well as at your ability to clearly articulate the main points of the text(s), connect the readings to contemporary issues and other readings covered throughout the semester.

**Essay:** There will be one paper assignment (approximately 3-5 pages in length). **It is due on May 1 at 11:59 pm.** Specifics concerning the written assignment will be communicated to you at a later date. It will account for 10% of your final grade.

**Exams:** Three mandatory in-class exams will determine the major part of your grade. They will assess your knowledge of the subjects covered throughout the semester.
- The course is divided into three themes: The Founding and American Political Thought; Institutions of the American Political System; and Issues in American Politics. The first two exams will deal with information from the first two themes of the course. The first exam will be worth 20% and the second exam will be worth 30%, totaling 50% of your final grade.
- The third exam will test you on the third theme as well as contain a cumulative assessment. It will account for 30% of your final grade.
- Recap of the grade break down for the three in-class exams
  - Exam no. 1 – 20%
  - Exam no. 2 – 30%
  - Exam no. 3 – 30%
- All three exams must be completed to receive a grade for the course.
- Summary of grade breakdown
  - Exam no. 1 – 20%
  - Exam no. 2 – 30%
  - Exam no. 3 – 30%
  - Paper Assignment – 10%
  - Class Participation – 10%

**Required Texts:** The only required text for the course is *We the People* (14th ed.); W.W. Norton & Co., 2022 by Ginsberg, Lowi, Weir, Tolbert, Campbell, and Ming Francis. **All other readings will be available on Canvas.**
Course Schedule

THEME I. FOUNDING AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

Week 1: Reconciling American Political Thought with American Political Culture

   Wednesday, January 18 –
   Introduction

   Friday, January 20 –
   de Tocqueville, Alexis: Democracy in America (1839): Chapters 1-5

Week 2: Reconciling American Political Thought (continued)

   Monday, January 23 –

   Wednesday, January 25 –
   Hartz, Louis: The Liberal Tradition in America (1955): Chapter 1

   Friday, January 27 –
   Rogers M. Smith, “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,” American Political Science Review 87 (3) (September 1993): 549-566

Week 3: Founding and Structure of American Government

   Monday, January 30 –
   The Articles of Confederation
   (1777): http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/artconf.asp#art1

   Constitution of the USA (1787): http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/usconst.asp

   Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2018): Chapter 2 – Founding and the Constitution

   Wednesday, February 1
   Federalist Papers #10, #51
   https://www.congress.gov/resources/display/content/The+Federalist+Papers

   Friday, February 3 –
Review for first exam

Week 4:

Monday, February 6 –
In-class Exam no. 1

THEME II. INSTITUTIONS OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

American Federalism:

Wednesday, February 8 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 3 – American Federalism

Friday, February 10 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 3 – American Federalism

Week 5: Congress and the Presidency

Congress:

Monday, February 13 –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 12 – Congress

Wednesday, February 15 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 6 – Congress

The Presidency

Friday, February 17 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 13 – The Presidency

Week 6: The Presidency and the Judiciary

The Presidency (continued)

Monday, February 20 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 7 – The Presidency

The Judiciary

Wednesday, February 22 –
Friday, February 24 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 9 – The Judiciary

Recommended:

Week 7: The Bureaucracy and Civil Liberties

The Bureaucracy:
Monday, February 27 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 14 – The Bureaucracy

Wednesday, March 1 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 8 – The Bureaucracy

Civil Liberties:
Friday, March 3 –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapters 4 – Civil Liberties

Week 8: Civil Liberties and the Media

Civil Liberties (continued):
Monday, March 6 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 5 – Civil Liberties

The Media:
Wednesday, March 8 –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 7- The Media

Friday, March 10 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 14 – The Media
March 13 - March 17 ***********No Class – Spring Break***********

Week 9: Public Opinion and Political Parties

Monday, March 20 –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 6 – Public Opinion

Wednesday, March 22 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 10 – Public Opinion

Political Parties:

Friday, March 24 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapters 9 – Political Parties

Week 9 – Political Parties and Campaigns-Elections

Political Parties (continued):

Monday, March 27 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 12 Political Parties

Campaigns and Elections:

Wednesday, March 29 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 10 – Campaigns and Elections

Friday, March 31 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapters 11 – Voting, Campaigns, and Elections

Week 10: Exam no. 2 and Government’s Role in the Economy

Monday, April 3 –
Review for Tri-Term No. 2

Wednesday, April 5 –
In-class Exam no. 2
THEME III. CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN AMERICAN POLITICS

The Government’s Role in the American Economy

**Friday, April 7 –**

Recommended:

Campbell, Karen A. “The Economic Role of Government: Focus on Stability, Not Spending.” Backgrounder; No. 2316; September 17, 2009; The Heritage Foundation

**Week 11: Civil Rights and the Politics of Social Welfare**

**Civil Rights:**

**Monday, April 10 –**
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: *We the People* (2014): Chapter 5 – Civil Rights

**Wednesday, April 12 –**

**The Politics of Social Welfare:**

**Friday, April 14 –**

**Week 12: The Politics of Social Welfare and Changes to American Citizenship**

**The Politics of Social Welfare (continued):**

**Monday, April 17 –**
Monday, April 17 – *Paper Assignment posted on Canvas*

**Changes to American Citizenship**

**Wednesday, April 19 –**
Ginsberg and Crenson: *Downsizing Democracy* (2004): Chapters 1 and 5

**Friday, April 21 –**
Putnam, Robert D.: “The Strange Disappearance of Civic America”
http://prospect.org/article/strange-disappearance-civic-america

Recommended:

Jager, Anton. “From Bowling Alone to Posting Alone” Jacobin. December 5, 2022:
https://jacobin.com/2022/12/from-bowling-alone-to-posting-alone

**Week 13: Changes to American Citizenship and American Foreign Policy-Democracy**

**Changes to American Citizenship (continued)**

**Monday, April 24 –**
“The Tocqueville Files” (special section on Putnam’s “Strange Disappearance” from *The American Prospect*) Responses by Theda Skocpol, Alejandro Portes, Michael Schudson, Richard Vallely, and Robert Putnam

Unsolved Mysteries; The Tocqueville Files – Theda Skocpol
Unsolved Mysteries; The Tocqueville Files – Alejandro Portes
Unsolved Mysteries; The Tocqueville Files - Michael Schudson
Couch Potato Democracy (from Tocqueville Files II) – Richard Valley
Robert Putnam Responds (from Tocqueville Files II) - Robert Putnam

**American Foreign Policy and Democracy**

**Wednesday, April 26 –**
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: *We the People* (2014): Chapter 18 – Foreign Policy and Democracy

Recommended:
Poushter, Jacob and Moira Fagan. “Americans See Spread of Disease as Top


The Current State of American Democracy

**Friday, April 28** –

Recommended:

**Week 14:**

The Current State of American Democracy (continued)

**Monday, May 1** –

*Monday, May 1 – Paper Assignment Due, 11:59 pm EST*

In-class Exam no. 3 – Friday, May 5 – 8AM – 11AM; Room: Thwing 201