

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 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 December 3 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 in order 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 (13th ed.); W.W. Norton & Co., 2021 by Ginsberg, Lowi, Weir, & Tolbert. **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

Monday, August 23 –
Introduction

Wednesday, August 25 –
de Tocqueville, Alexis: Democracy in America (1839): Chapters 1-5

Friday, August 27 –
Locke, John: Second Treatise of Government (1689): Chapters 1 – 14 (p. 1-55)

Week 2: Reconciling American Political Thought (continued)

Monday, August 30 –
Hartz, Louis: The Liberal Tradition in America (1955): Chapter 1

Wednesday, September 1 –
Rogers M. Smith, “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,” *American Political Science Review* 87 (3) (September 1993): 549-566

Friday, September 3 –

Founding and Structure of American Government

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

Week 3:

Monday, September 6 – ***NO CLASS – Labor Day observance*******

Wednesday, September 8 -

Federalist Papers #10, #51

<https://www.congress.gov/resources/display/content/The+Federalist+Papers>

Friday, September 10 –

Review for first exam

Week 4:

Monday, September 13

In-class Exam no. 1

THEME II. INSTITUTIONS OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Wednesday, September 15 – American Federalism

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

Friday, September 17 –

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

Week 5: Congress

Monday, September 20 –

Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We The People (2014): Chapter 12 – Congress

Wednesday, September 22 –

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

Friday, September 24 – The Presidency

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

Week 6: The Presidency (continued)

Monday, September 27 –

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

Wednesday, September 29 – The Judiciary

Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 15 – The Federal Courts

Friday, October 1 –

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

Recommended:

Millhiser, Ian. “What Trump Has Done to the Courts Explained” Vox; February 4, 2020: <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/12/9/20962980/trump-supreme-court-federal-judges>

Week 7: The Bureaucracy

Monday, October 4 –

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

Wednesday, October 6 –

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

Civil Liberties

Friday, October 8 –

Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We The People (2014): Chapters 4 – Civil Liberties

Week 8:

Monday, October 11 –

Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 5 – Civil Liberties

The Media

Wednesday, October 13 –

Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We The People (2014): Chapter 7- The Media

Friday, October 15 –

Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 14 – The Media

Week 9: Public Opinion

Monday, October 18 – ***No Class – Fall Break *******

Wednesday, October 20 –

Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We The People (2014): Chapter 6 – Public Opinion

Friday, October 22 –

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

Week 9:

Parties and Elections

Monday, October 25 –

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

Wednesday, October 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

Friday, October 29 –

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

Week 10:

Monday, November 1 –

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

Wednesday, November 3 –

Review for Tri-Term No. 2

Friday, November 5 –

In-class Exam no. 2

Week 11:

The Government's Role in the American Economy

Monday, November 8 –

Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 16 – Government and the Economy

Recommended:

Porter, Eduardo “The Case for More and Higher Taxes” The New York Times; August 2, 2016: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/business/economy/rethinking-the-role-of-government-in-society.html>

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

THEME III. ISSUES IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Civil Rights

Wednesday, November 10 –

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

Friday, November 12 –

Rothstein, Richard. “The Making of Ferguson: Public Policies at the Root of its Troubles” –

Week 12:

Monday, November 15 – The Politics of Social Welfare

Hacker, Jacob. “Privatizing Risks without Privatizing the Welfare State: The Politics of Social Policy Reform in the United States.” *American Political Science Review*; Vol. 98; No. 2 (May 2004).

Wednesday, November 17 –

Skocpol, Theda, and Vanessa Williamson. "Obama and the transformation of US public policy: The struggle to reform health care." *Ariz. St. LJ* 42 (2010): 1203.

The Decline of Social Capital?

Friday, November 19 –

Ginsberg and Crenson: Downsizing Democracy (2004): Chapters 1 and 5

Friday, November 19 - *Paper Assignment posted on Canvas*

Week 13:

Monday, November 22 –

Putnam, Robert D.: “The Strange Disappearance of Civic America”
<http://prospect.org/article/strange-disappearance-civic-america>

Wednesday, November 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](#)

Week 14:

Monday, November 29 – American Foreign Policy and Democracy

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 International Threat, Along With Terrorism, Nuclear Weapons, Cyberattacks.” Pew Research Center (April 13, 2020):

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/04/13/americans-see-spread-of-disease-as-top-international-threat-along-with-terrorism-nuclear-weapons-cyberattacks/>

Gramlich, John “Defending against terrorism has remained a top policy priority for Americans since 9/11” Pew Research Center (September 11, 2018):

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/11/defending-against-terrorism-has-remained-a-top-policy-priority-for-americans-since-9-11/>

“The Threat of Terrorism and Civil Liberties” US Politics and Policy; Pew Research Center (December 3, 2013): <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/section-4-the->

[threat-of-terrorism-and-civil-liberties/](#)

The Current State of American Democracy

Wednesday, December 1 –

Roberts, David “Donald Trump and the Rise of Tribal Epistemology: Journalism Cannot Be Neutral Toward a Threat to the Conditions That Make It Possible.” Vox; May 19, 2017: <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/22/14762030/donald-trump-tribal-epistemology>

Recommended:

Roberts, David “America is Facing an Epistemic Crisis” Vox; November 2, 2017: <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/11/2/16588964/america-epistemic-crisis>

Wednesday, May 5 – Take Home Exam no. 3 posted on Canvas

Friday, December 3 –

Madrigal, Alexis What Facebook Did to American Democracy: And Why It Was So Hard to See It Coming: <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/10/what-facebook-did/542502/>

Friday, December 3 – Paper Assignment Due, 11 :59 pm EST

In-class Exam no. 3 – December 13 – 8AM – 11AM; Room: Thwing 201