

The US Political System

Professor: Girma Parris

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Office Hours: Wednesday 12:00 – 1:30 or by 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.
- 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 theoretical and empirical readings covered throughout the semester.

Essay: There will be one paper assignment (approximately 2 pages in length). 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. Each exam will be worth 25% (totaling 50%) of your final grade.
- The third exam will test you on the third theme as well as contain a cumulative section. It will account for 30% of your final grade.
- All three exams must be completed in order to receive a grade for the course.

Required Texts: The only required text for the course is We the People (12th ed.); W.W. Norton & Co., 2019 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, January 13 –

Introduction

Wednesday, January 15 –

de Tocqueville, Alexis: Democracy in America (1839): Chapters 1-5

Friday, January 17 –

Hartz, Louis: The Liberal Tradition in America (1955): Chapter 1

Week 2: Reconciling American Political Thought (continued)

Monday, January 20 – No Class – Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday

Wednesday, January 22 –

Locke, John: Second Treatise of Government (1821): Chapters 1 – 14 (p. 1-55)

Friday, January 24 –

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 27 –

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 (2014): Chapter 2 – Founding and the Constitution

Wednesday, January 29 –

Federalist Papers #10, #51

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

**Friday, January 31 –
Review for first exam**

THEME II. INSTITUTIONS OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Week 4: American Federalism

Monday, February 3 – First midterm exam

Wednesday, February 5 –

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

Friday, February 7 –

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

Week 5: The Congress

Monday, February 10 –

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

Wednesday, February 12 –

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

The Presidency

Friday, February 14 –

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

Week 6:

Monday, February 17 –

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 19 –

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

Friday, February 21 –

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

Civil Liberties

Monday, February 24 –

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

Week 8: Civil Liberties (continued)

Wednesday, February 26 –

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

The Media

Friday, February 28 –

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

Monday, March 2 –

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

Public Opinion

Wednesday, March 4 –

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

Friday, March 6 –

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

Monday, March 9 – 13 *** NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK *******

Parties and Elections

Monday, March 16 –

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

Wednesday, March 18 –

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

Friday, March 20 –

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

Week 7:

Monday, March 23 –

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

Wednesday, March 25 –

Review for Tri-Term No. 2

Friday, March 27 – Second Midterm

The Government's Role in the American Economy

Monday, March 30 –

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

Handouts:

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

Week 11: The Politics of Race and Immigration

Wednesday, April 1 –

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

Friday, April 3 –

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

Week 12: The Politics of Social Welfare

Monday, April 6 –

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, April 8 –

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.

Friday, April 10 – No Class – Attending Conference

Week 13: The Decline of Social Capital?

Monday, April 13 –

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

Wednesday, April 15 –

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

Friday, April 17 – No Class – Attending Conference

“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](#)

Monday, April 20 –

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

Recommended:

“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/>

Week 14: American Foreign Policy and Democracy

Wednesday, April 22 –

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>

The Current State of American Democracy

Friday, April 24 –

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/>

Monday, April 27 – Paper Due at 11:59 pm

Review for exam no. 3

Final Exam : May 4 – 8 :00 AM – 11 :00 AM – Thwing 201