

Johns Hopkins University
Department of Political Science

AS 190.101
Introduction to American Politics
Fall 2019

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This course provides an introduction to American politics and government. For decades, the United States was considered the most stable and robust democracy in the world, anchored by the world's oldest constitution and longstanding practices of self-government and the rule of law. American democracy has been responsible for many important accomplishments, from a robust economy and broad prosperity to a society that broadly protects important human freedoms. At the same time, American politics and society have, from the beginning, been shaped by racial segregation and inequality in ways that still resonate deeply in American life.

Moreover, in recent years, a number of forces have combined to undermine the stability of American democracy. Americans disagree more and more about politics and policy and are increasingly retreating into conflicting political identities. Economic inequality and partisan polarization have made consensus elusive, and growing mistrust of public officials and institutions has fueled cynicism about whether government can be responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens. The election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 brought many of these trends into sharp relief, and the first two years of Trump's presidency thus far have suggested that many of the features of the American political system that we have long taken for granted — the protection of civil rights and civil liberties, the freedom of the press, the separation of powers, the rule of law, and democratic governance itself — may be under threat.

In this course, we will examine both the fundamental principles, structures, and processes that define the American political system and the ways in which these features of American politics have changed in recent decades to produce the current predicament of anxiety and dysfunction.

Course Objectives

At the conclusion of this course, students will be able to:

- Understand the basic structure and function of the American political system;
- Recognize and apply a variety of social scientific frameworks for the study of politics;
- Reason critically and write clearly about American politics;
- Analyze recent changes in American politics in historical and comparative perspective; and

- Understand the central role of racial diversity and hierarchy in shaping American politics over history.

Books and Readings

The following books have been ordered at Barnes and Noble:

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power* [“Coates”]
 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* [“L&Z”]
 Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*, new and expanded ed. [“M&O”]
 Nolan McCarty, *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know* [“McCarty”]
 Richard M. Valelly, *American Politics: A Very Short Introduction* [“Valelly, VSI”]

All other readings are available electronically through Blackboard.

In addition to the assigned readings for each session, you should follow the news, paying special attention to national politics and government and events relating to course topics. The best way to do this is to read a national newspaper, such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or the *Wall Street Journal*, every day. Reliable online sources include Vox, Slate, Politico, Axios, and The Hill, but you should consider these as supplements to serious newspapers, not substitutes. You should also pay attention to one or more of the following blogs, which consider how contemporary social science can aid our understanding of current events. Two are written by political scientists: the Monkey Cage (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/>) and the Mischiefs of Faction (<https://www.mischiefsoffaction.com>); a third, the *New York Times’s* Upshot (<https://www.nytimes.com/section/upshot>), considers a wider range of data- and evidence-driven perspectives. Attention to these blogs will help you with several of the writings assignments (see below).

Course Requirements

Faithful attendance at **lectures** (Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:00-12:50 PM, Mergenthaler Hall 111)

Regular **section** attendance (Fridays, various times) and active, informed, and thoughtful participation reflecting command of each week’s reading (10% of final grade)

Midterm exam, in class, 22 October (20%)

Four short writing assignments (10% each; detailed instructions to be posted in advance)

- An analysis of your Senators and Representatives, including ideology, donors, and state/district characteristics, due 24 September
- **Two** short essays analyzing a current political or policy issue using some of the social-scientific concepts and approaches covered in the course but aimed at a non-specialist educated audience (suitable for posting on one of the blogs mentioned above, such as the Monkey Cage or the Mischiefs of Faction), due 10 October and 5 November
- A short essay on the state of American democracy, due 5 December

Final exam, 19 December, 6:00 PM – 9:00 PM (30%)

Policy on Electronic Devices

Students may not use laptops, iPads, or other tablet PCs during lectures. (The only exceptions to this policy are for students who need accommodations as documented in writing by the Office of Disability Services; if this applies to you, please inform me privately.) In addition, cell phones, iPods, and similar devices should be turned off and put away during lectures. Teaching assistants may establish their own electronic-device policies for sections.

Writing

A further aim of this course is to encourage clear and concise writing about politics, free of cant, obfuscation, and other nonsense. Bad writing, in fact, usually reveals muddled thinking. Conversely, clear thinking produces good writing — lucid, fluent prose that clearly conveys the writer’s ideas and argument to the reader. Written work, consequently, will be evaluated not only for quality of ideas but also for clarity and economy of expression. Flawless grammar and correct spelling are *minimum* requirements for acceptable writing.

The standard for matters of grammar, usage, and style in this course is *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White. Everyone who writes in English should be familiar with this book. Copies are available at Barnes and Noble and elsewhere. If you do not already own this book, you should buy it and read it. If you have read it before, you should read it again. Put it under your pillow at night. If you heed its advice and use it wisely your writing will almost certainly improve (for which your teachers will thank you).

You should also consider reading some nonfiction essays by masters of the genre. Some authors to consider are George Orwell, E. B. White, Joseph Mitchell, James Baldwin, Joan Didion, David Remnick, and Ta-Nehisi Coates (among others — this is a list of personal favorites). Above all, read Orwell’s essay, “Politics and the English Language,” which is both a beautifully written model of tight construction and sound argumentation and a caution against the common pitfalls of writing about politics. You will find this as well as other essays by these writers entertaining as well as instructive.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university’s code of academic integrity, which reads as follows:

“Undergraduate students enrolled in the Krieger School of Arts & Sciences or the Whiting School of Engineering at the Johns Hopkins University assume a duty to conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to the university’s mission as an institution of higher learning. Students are obliged to refrain from acts which they know, or under circumstances have reason to know, violate the academic integrity of the university. Violations of academic ethics include, but are not limited to:

- cheating;
- plagiarism; submitting the same or substantially similar work to satisfy the requirements of more than one course without permission; submitting as one’s own the same or substantially similar work as another;
- knowingly furnishing false information to any agent of the university for inclusion in academic records;

- falsification, forgery, alteration, destruction, or misuse of official university documents or seal.”

Information on academic integrity and other student life policies and procedures can be found at e-catalog.jhu.edu/undergrad-students/student-life-policies. Suspected violations of academic integrity will be treated with the utmost seriousness according to the procedures laid out in that document.

Course Outline and Required Readings

Introduction

3 September – The American Experiment: Democracy Under Threat?

L&Z, Introduction and chaps. 1-2

M&O, chap. 1

Nikole Hannah-Jones, “America Wasn’t a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made it One,”

New York Times Magazine, 18 August 2019

(<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>)

Foundations

5 September – Democracy and the American Idea

Valelly, VSI, chap. 1

The Declaration of Independence

Rogers M. Smith, “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America,” *American Political Science Review* 87 (1993): 549-66

10 September – Constitutional Purpose

The United States Constitution

James Madison, *Federalist Papers* #10 and #51

Robert A. Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution*, chap. 2

12 September – Constitutional Choices

John W. Kingdon, *America the Unusual*, chap. 1

Robertson, *The Original Compromise*, chaps. 13-14 (skim)

Institutions

17 September – Congress I: The Electoral Connection

Valelly, VSI, chap. 3

David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, chap. 1

McCarty, chaps. 1-3

19 September – Congress II: Rules and Organization

Valelly, VSI, chap. 4

M&O, chaps. 2-3

McCarty, chap. 7

24 September – Federalism – SHORT PAPER #1 (CONGRESS) DUE

David Brian Robertson, *Federalism and the Making of America*, chaps. 1 and 4

26 September – Presidency and Executive Branch I: Presidents and Presidential Power

Valelly, VSI, chap. 2

Coates, chap. 5

1 October – NO LECTURE

3 October – Presidency and Executive Branch II: Presidents, Policy, and the Separation of Powers

Corey Robin, “The Politics Trump Makes,” *n+1* (<https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-politics-trump-makes/>)

L&Z, chap. 3

Coates, chap. 8

8 October – Presidency and Executive Branch III: The Bureaucracy and Policy Implementation

Valelly, VSI, chap. 6

Terry M. Moe, “The Politics of Bureaucratic Structure,” in *Can the Government Govern*, ed. John E. Chubb and Paul E. Peterson

10 October – Democracy and American Political Institutions – SHORT PAPER #2 (BLOG POST #1) DUE

L&Z, chapters 4-8

Mass Politics and Mass-Elite Linkages

15 October – Political Parties and Polarization

Valelly, VSI, chap. 8

M&O, chap. 5 (and review chap. 2)

McCarty, chap. 5

17 October – Public Opinion

Valelly, VSI, chap. 7

McCarty, chap. 4

Amanda Taub and Brendan Nyhan, “Why People Continue to Believe Objectively False Things,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2017

22 October – MIDTERM

Note: The Midterm will cover material only through the “Institutions” section of the course, i.e. up to and including the lecture and readings scheduled for 10 October)

24 October – Political Participation I: Voting and Elections

McCarty, chap. 6

Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy For Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, chap. 2

Richard M. Valelly, "Will the Voting Rights Act of 1965 Survive?" Scholars Strategy Network (http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/ssn_basic_facts_valelly_on_the_second_reconstruction2.pdf)

Zoltan Hajnal, Nazita Lajevardi, Lindsay Nielson, "Strict Voter Identification Laws Advantage Whites — And Skew American Democracy to the Right," Scholars Strategy Network (<http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/brief/strict-voter-identification-laws-advantage-whites—and-skew-american-democracy-right>)

29 October – Political Participation II: Civic Engagement and Participation

Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, pp. 5-22, 33-36

Kay Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady, "The Big Tilt," *American Prospect*, May-June 1997

Lara Putnam and Theda Skocpol, "Middle America Reboots Democracy," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, February 20, 2018 (<https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/middle-america-reboots-democracy/>)

31 October – Interests, Organizations, and Money

E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, chap. 1

Larry M. Bartels, "Economic Inequality and Political Representation," in *The Unsustainable American State*, ed. Lawrence Jacobs and Desmond King

Jane Mayer, "The Koch Brothers' Covert Operations," *New Yorker*, August 30, 2010

What Can/Does Government Do?

5 November – Courts I: The Courts in the Political System

Valelly, VSI, chap. 5

Review U.S. Constitution, Article III

Robert A. Dahl, "Decision-Making in a Democracy: The Supreme Court as a National Policy-Maker," *Journal of Public Law* 6 (1957): 279-95

Jack M. Balkin, "From Off the Wall to On the Wall: How the Mandate Challenge Went Mainstream," *The Atlantic*, June 4, 2012

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/06/from-off-the-wall-to-on-the-wall-how-the-mandate-challenge-went-mainstream/258040/>)

7 November – Courts II: The Supreme Court and the Law

Guest Lecture: Professor Emily Zackin

Alexander Hamilton, Federalist Paper #78

Mark A. Graber, *A New Introduction to American Constitutionalism*, pp. 88-99, 212-220

Jamal Greene, "Interpretation," in *The Oxford Handbook of the U.S. Constitution*, ed. Mark Tushnet, Mark A. Graber, and Sanford Levinson

12 November – Protecting Liberty – SHORT PAPER #3 (BLOG POST #2) DUE

Roe v. Wade (1973), excerpts in Howard Gilman, Mark A. Graber, and Keith E. Whittington, *American Constitutionalism, Volume 2: Rights and Liberties*

District of Columbia v. Heller (2008), excerpts in Gilman, Graber, and Whittington, *American Constitutionalism*

Charles Epp and Steven Maynard-Moody, “Philando Castile and the Human Costs of a Widespread Police Practice,” *Washington Monthly*, July 21, 2016
[\(https://washingtonmonthly.com/2016/07/21/philando-castile-and-the-human-costs-of-a-widespread-police-practice/\)](https://washingtonmonthly.com/2016/07/21/philando-castile-and-the-human-costs-of-a-widespread-police-practice/)

14 November – Protecting Rights

Coates, chap. 6

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954), excerpts in Howard Gilman, Mark A. Graber, and Keith E. Whittington, *American Constitutionalism, Volume 2: Rights and Liberties*

Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978), excerpts in Howard Gilman, Mark A. Graber, and Keith E. Whittington, *American Constitutionalism, Volume 2: Rights and Liberties*

Obergefell v. Hodges (2015), excerpts in *New York Times*
[\(https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/us/2014-term-supreme-court-decision-same-sex-marriage.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/us/2014-term-supreme-court-decision-same-sex-marriage.html)

19 November – Regulating the Economy and Advancing Social Welfare

Andrea Louise Campbell, “Policy Feedbacks and the Impact of Policy Designs on Public Opinion,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 36 (2011): 961-73

Suzanne Mettler, “20,000 Leagues Under the State,” *Washington Monthly*, July/August 2011
[\(https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/julyaug-2011/20000-leagues-under-the-state/\)](https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/julyaug-2011/20000-leagues-under-the-state/)

Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, chap. 3

21 November – Taxing and Spending

Henry Aaron, “The Ultimate, Definitive Guide to the Budget Deficit,” Brookings Institution, July 16, 2014 (<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-ultimate-definitive-guide-to-the-budget-deficit/>)

Andrea Louise Campbell, “America the Undertaxed,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2012, 99-112

Policy Basics: Where Do Our Federal Tax Dollars Go?” Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, October 4, 2017 (<https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-budget/policy-basics-where-do-our-federal-tax-dollars-go>)

Louise Sheiner, “Millennials could end up the biggest losers of Trump’s fiscal policies,” Brookings Institution, January 31, 2017
[\(https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/millennials-could-end-up-the-biggest-losers-of-trumps-fiscal-policies/\)](https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/millennials-could-end-up-the-biggest-losers-of-trumps-fiscal-policies/)

***** Thanksgiving Break *****

Conclusion

3 December – 2020 Preview

TBD

5 December – What Next? The State of American Democracy – SHORT PAPER #4
(DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA) DUE

Valelly, VSI, chaps. 9-10

L&Z, chap. 9

McCarty, chap. 8

19 December, 6:00 PM – 9:00 PM, 111 Mergenthaler – FINAL EXAM