Political Science 204: Current Controversies in American Politics

- Business Administration 130
- Mondays only, 5:45pm to 8:35pm
- Instructor: Steven Koczak
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- Office Hours, Thursdays, 5:45pm to 7pm, Rockefeller College Contact Office (Humanities B-16) or as arranged

There's many controversies in American politics. There always have been, and there always will be. In this class, we'll be restricting ourselves to just four: The Culture Wars and Civility in Politics (in essence taking two controversies as one); Corruption, Scandals, and Ethics; Gay Marriage; and Torture.

There's a near-infinite list of controversies and approaches to studying them. I find it useful to break controversies up into two broad categories: Process, and Policy. The distinction between them isn't very clear sometimes, but I still think it's useful to draw the line, even if it's somewhat fuzzy.

Process and Policy

Two of the four controversies we'll be studying primarily relate to the means of politics. I call issues that relate to the means of politics “process” issues. Broadly speaking, process issues can be rephrased as “how” questions of politics. How are we going to conduct ourselves politically? What procedures will we use? How will government be organized? What kinds of political actions will be permissible? That sort of thing.

The two process topics we'll cover are the Culture Wars and Civility in Politics, and Corruption and Scandal. Here are some additional examples, beyond what we'll cover in the class, of “process” topics, so you get a better feel for what I mean.

- Campaign finance reform.
- The Presidential or Gubernatorial veto power.
- What parliamentary procedures will the New York State Senate follow.
- Campaigns and Elections.

There's great variety among all the topics I've named, but what all of these topics have in common is that they describe or deal with how politics will be conducted. It's fair, I think, to say that most of the topics you'll cover in Political Science classes are “process” issues. We Political Scientists are mostly interested in the “hows” of politics.

The other two topics of the course relate primarily to the ends of politics, to the public policies that politicians and interest groups seek to enact or block the enactment of, through the political process. I call these kinds of issues “policy” topics. Broadly speaking, policy issues can be rephrased as “what” questions. What are we trying to do? What policies are we trying to enact?

The two policy issues we'll be discussing and learning about in this class are gay marriage and torture. Here are some additional examples, beyond what we'll cover in the class, of “policy” topics.

- The Iraq war.
- The death penalty.
- The minimum age to legally hunt big game, such as bears.
• The minimum wage.
• Whether or not gambling should be legal.

As you can see, policy and process issues can vary considerably in how weighty or “important” they appear to be. I urge you to remember, however, that almost every issue, be it process or policy, is of critical importance to someone. Politicians' power sometimes rise and fall on the basis of decisions over parliamentary procedures, and I once witnessed a bitter debate in the New York State Senate that revolved around the minimum age to hunt big game.

Every political decision made, be it one of policy or process, helps someone and hurts someone. That is the great and undeniable tragedy of political life: Everything you do, or do not do, hurts someone.

**The Four Topics/Class Schedule**

It should of course go without saying that this “schedule” is to be considered tentative. This schedule, or anything in the syllabus really, may have to be changed due to circumstances.

Because this class is weekly, we'll have only 14 class sessions. Each of the four topics will be covered in approximately 3 sessions, for a total of 8 to 10 classroom hours. That's a total of 12, with 2 sessions reserved for turning your papers/examinations, and for any wrap-up discussions that may be necessary.

There is never such a thing as “just the right amount” of time for talking about politics. It's either too much or too little. If needed, we'll adjust our time frame as we go.

Ideally I'd have the fist class session solely devoted to getting to know each other, but we're basically forced to dive right in and this first class sessions, unfortunately, will contain substantive lectures.

**Process Topic One: The Culture Wars and Civility in Politics**

This is really two highly-related issues. Are Americans deeply divided into “red states” and “blue states”? If so, do the divisions represent a “culture war,” as some have argued since at least the early 1990s? If there really is a “culture war,” can we ever be expected to do anything but hate one another? Disturbingly, given the high stakes game that politics is, perhaps getting along too much to ask? Maybe we should hate each other, if the differences between us are really that fundamental.

**Required Reading:**
• Morris Fiornia, *Culture War?* (for sale at the campus bookstore)

**Recommend Readings:**
• James Hunter, *Culture Wars* (on reserve in the library)
• Sunil Ahuja, *Congress Behaving Badly* (on reserve in the library, or will be once I'm done with it in class)
• Alan Abromowitz and Kyle Saunders, *Is Polarization a Myth?* (on the Internet) (article, not book)
• Lots of stuff has been written about this, many of it may prove useful to you

**Class Sessions:**
• January 28
• February 4
• February 11
Process Topic Two: Corruption and Scandal

Politicians are all corrupt, aren't they? Or is it just that, as a great political theorist named Michael Walzer once suggested, politicians rule over us, we think the pleasures of ruling are greater than the pleasures of being ruled, and hence we hate them and assume they are worse than the rest of us? Is all corruption created equal? Are scandals always bad? Is it even possible to have a “moral politician?” There are many kinds of scandals. Some involve misuse of power, some involve sex, some involve outright bribe-taking or similar activities. And some merely involve dirty pictures on Twitter.

Required Readings:
- Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (on the Internet, and, hopefully, on reserve in the library)
- Michael Walzer, “Political Action: the Problem of Dirty Hands” (available on library databases, and on the Internet if you look hard enough)
- Joseph F. Zimmerman, Curbing Unethical Behavior in Government (on reserve in the library)
- Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince (cheaply available from many bookstores, and available for free on the Internet)

Recommended Reading:
- Basically anything you can get your hands on about any political scandal could potentially be of use.

Class Sessions
- February 18
- February 25
- March 4

March 11: Take-Home Midterm (aka first paper) due at the start of class (see below)

Classes suspended from March 15 to March 23, so no class on March 18

Policy Topic One: Gay Marriage

Everyone knows what this issue is based on the name alone; it doesn't have to be explained much beyond that, at least in broad terms. Further, everyone pretty much knows where he or she stands on it, instinctively. But, beyond that clear outline, things can again get a little fuzzy. This topic is being played out mostly, but not exclusively, at the state level, and we'll have a chance to look at the gay marriage law enacted in New York State in 2011.

Required Readings:
- Craig A. Rimmerman and Clyde Wilcox, The Politics of Same-Sex Marriage (for sale at the campus bookstore)
  - Read these articles (identified by author of the article): Rimmerman and Wilcox: Rom; Riggle and Rostosky; Shaiko; Wald and Glover; Campbell and Robinson; Cahill; Tadlock, Gordon, and Popp; Wilcox, Brewer, Shames, and Lake; Rayside
  - Also read any articles that you think you may find useful
- New York State's “gay marriage bill” (available on the Internet, we'll go over in class how to acquire it)

Class Sessions
• March 25
• April 1
• April 8

**Policy Topic Two: Torture**

Torture is, as a general rule bad, and illegal. But is it *always* bad? Does torture even work? Meaning, is torture an effective means of getting information and obtaining control over someone? If it's not, then why is it still such a live topic? If it doesn't work, why do we continually take the moral and legal risk and do it anyway?

*Required Readings:*
- Charles Fried and Gregory Fried, *Because it is Wrong* (for sale at the campus bookstore)

*Recommended Readings:*
- Anything on torture potentially might be of use to you.
- Alan Dershowitz, “The Case for Torture Warrants” (Google the title, the article is on his Internet site)

*Class Sessions:*
- April 15
- April 22
- April 29

**May 6: Take-Home Final (aka last paper) due at the start of class  (See below)**

*Assignments and Grading*

Grades will be determined by a combination of a take-home midterm, a take-home final, class attendance, and class participation.

Printed copies of the papers are preferable. I won't tell you I won't take E-Mailed papers in a pinch, but I won't like it.

The assignments are somewhat vague. While this risks you not having direction I've discovered that the students tend to benefit somewhat from the freedom. It enables you to pursue a variety of angles in writing your papers. As long as what you write is of good quality and meets the requirements described I intend to be very flexible on what I'll accept.

Come to me if you need more guidance.

**The Midterm**

- A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you will summarize the two “process” issues covered in class, show me that you have read the required materials, and understood and digested them, and bring in outside materials where appropriate. You must come to some kind of considered analytical conclusion either about each topic in isolation or about both topics together or about the political process in general. (*How I felt about this stuff.*) It should go without saying that your analytical conclusion should have some connection to your summaries. You may treat the topics together, or in essence write two mini-papers.

OR:
A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you will argue that I missed the boat entirely when I picked these two process issues to focus on, there's another process issue that you feel is much more important. This option is harder than the first, and I'll try to go easier on the grading because the assignment itself is harder. However, you must still demonstrate to me that you have done the required class readings, and must make a good go at convincing me of your case.

The midterm will be worth 100 points.
- 100 to 95: A
- 94 to 90: B+
- 89 to 85: B
- 84 to 80: B-
- 79 to 75: C+
- 74 to 70: C
- 69 to 65: C-
- 64 to 60: D
- 59 and below: Failure.

The Take-Home Final
- A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you will summarize the two “policy” issues covered in class, show me that you have read the required materials, and understood and digested them, and bring in outside materials where appropriate. You must come to some kind of considered analytical conclusion either about each topic in isolation or about both topics together or about the political process in general. (How I felt about this stuff.) It should go without saying that your analytical conclusion should have some connection to your summaries.

OR:
- A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you will argue that I missed the boat entirely when I picked these two policy issues to focus on, there's another process issue that you feel is much more important. This option is harder than the first. You must still demonstrate to me that you have done the required class readings, and must make a good go at convincing me of your case.

OR:
- A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you in some way link one of the process issues to one of the policy issues.

The final will be worth 100 points.
- 100 to 95: A
- 94 to 90: B+
- 89 to 85: B
- 84 to 80: B-
- 79 to 75: C+
- 74 to 70: C
- 69 to 65: C-
- 64 to 60: D
- 59 and below: Failure.

Feel free to come to me if you need more guidance on the final. I recognize that the assignments are
All page counts requirements could be considered approximate. Papers longer than 10 pages are acceptable, but rambling will not help. A paper that is shorter than 4 pages will have its work cut out for it; these are not topics that are easy to deal with in less than 4 pages. But if you've written 4 pages and feel quite confident about it? No reason to pad the paper. If you add, be sure to add substance. It will go better for you if you start writing your papers considerably in advance of the due date.

The total grade for the class will be based on 200 points.

- 200 to 190: A
- 189 to 180: B+
- 179 to 170: B
- 169 to 160: B-
- 159 to 150: C+
- 149 to 140: C
- 139 to 130: C-
- 129 to 120: D
- 119 and below: E, or "Failure."

A- grades will be utilized to bump up high B+ grades where appropriate. (Where I feel I've been too harsh, where class participation warrants it, where extra credit applies, etc.) I won't reduce A grades to A-s.

It would be a grave disappointment to me to have to fail any of you. I am considered a hard grader, though I came into this business intending to be an easy grader, but I specifically want you to succeed in my class, and all of your classes.

Attendance will be taken occasionally. Consistent lack of attendance may be a problem.

**Class Sessions and Other Matters**

The sessions for this class will be an odd mix of non-participatory lectures, participatory lectures, guided discussions, and sometimes we'll just watch relevant videos or listen to relevant radio broadcasts. (This is the beauty of having one of those “smart classrooms.”)

You should always come prepared, having made progress in the required readings. (It'll be pretty rare when a class session will go over a particular chapter in one of the books but it will on occasion happen.) If there is something specific you may be held responsible for in the next session, beyond what's conveyed in this syllabus, I will let you know. If there's no particular things you'll be held responsible for mentioned, assume you are to make steady, reasonable progress on the required readings for the topic under consideration.

I encourage you to exchange contact information, study together, and help each other out if you think it will be of use to you.

**About the Teacher/Contact Information**

I, Steven Koczak, am a PhD student here at the University at Albany. I have had a long and strange career in politics, academia, and government. I should finish my doctorate this semester. I count as my
former students a sitting Member of the New York State Assembly and a sitting New York State Senator.

As to what to call me, Mister Koczak will do.

I may be contacted at 518-754-6423 or, preferably, though E-Mail at stevenkoczak@hotmail.com or skoczak@albany.edu.