Introduction to American Politics

Spring 2013

Instructors and contact info
Professor Sally Friedman
sfreidman2@albany.edu
Professor Anne Hildreth
ahildreth@albany.edu

Office Hours
TH 2-4
MW 10-11
Humanities 16, 442-3112

Teaching Assistants
Adam Bjorlin
David Jones
Eric Kardas

Please feel free to contact us by email or visit our office hours if you have a question about the class, Political Science, or politics.

Course Description

What difference does it make that Democrat Barack Obama rather than Republican Mitt Romney won the 2012 presidential election? What factors influence the activities of politicians in the three branches of government, President, Congress and the Courts? What factors influence policymaking on key issues including gun rights, immigration or energy? These are important questions directly relevant to the lives of all of us. In this course, we will introduce you to the workings of American politics and the actors, institutions and policies that are associated therewith. We begin at the beginning: the first section of the course reviews the views, debates and conflicts dating from the founding period in American politics. In examining the actions of the framers of the Constitution we explore how they resolved their differences and the role the conflicts of their time play in our 21st century lives.

Thereafter, the course is organized into three sections, moving through the role of the public and elections, the workings of the major institutions of government and the ways actors inside and outside of government impact the policy making process. Throughout, the theme for the course centers around participation and ideals of citizenship more broadly. We share a conviction that participation in politics, inside or outside the system, is an important responsibility that comes with citizenship. Given this significant role for political participation, why do some people become active while others choose not to get involved? What difference does it make? In what ways do our actions actually have an impact?

These are thought provoking and controversial questions, and engaging them fully should contribute to a meaningful and productive semester.

Course and General Education Learning Objectives

By the end of the course we expect students will be able to:

1. Identify the various aspects of American politics: the role of the public, the workings of institutions and the policymaking process;
2. Understand the debates and conflicts articulated during America's Founding period and their connections to politics today;
3. Make connections among the institutions, actors and policies that are a part of the political process;
4. Evaluate current political issues in terms of the founding debates, citizen participation, institutions and policy process;
5. Understand the controversies surrounding our broader themes of political participation and citizenship, the advantages/disadvantages of different ways to participate and the difference that participation by individuals and groups can make;
6. Locate themselves on ideological and political continua and clearly explain where they stand on the debates and controversies we discuss and why.

In addition, this course fulfills both the U.S. History and Social Science requirements in the General Education program. It also can be used for the Flexible Gen Ed course requirement.

U.S. History courses enable students to demonstrate:
1. knowledge of a basic narrative of American history (political, economic, social, and/or cultural), including an awareness of unity and diversity in American society;
2. knowledge of representative institutions in American society and how they have shaped and been shaped by different groups;
3. an understanding of the relationship(s) between America and other parts of the world;
4. an understanding of various tools and approaches used in interpreting U.S. history.

Social Science courses enable students to demonstrate:
1. an understanding that human conduct and behavior more generally are subject to scientific inquiry;
2. an understanding of the difference between rigorous and systematic thinking and uncritical thinking about social phenomena;
3. an understanding of the kinds of questions social scientists ask and the ways they go about answering these questions;
4. knowledge of the major concepts, models and issues of at least one discipline in the social sciences;
5. an understanding of the methods social scientists use to explore social phenomena, such as observation, hypothesis development, measurement and data collection, experimentation, evaluation of evidence, employment of mathematical analysis, employment of interpretive analysis.

If you took AP Government in high school and transferred the credit into UAlbany you should not take this course. **This course is the direct equivalent for that AP course,** you cannot receive credit for both courses.

**A Note on Class Structure and Expectations**
As you are being asked to engage in a first course on American politics highlighting the role of citizen participation, we are also asking you to be a full participant in this class. Your participation and contributions-- in both lecture and discussion sections-- is valued. Thus, even in a course of about 150 people, class sessions will include lectures, a variety of individual and group exercises, discussions and simulations. In class sessions, we will explore material that sometimes covers and sometimes complements the assigned textbook chapters. Readings should be done in advance of the class session to which they are assigned. In addition, folders on
Blackboard, updated throughout the semester, will contain required supplemental readings. These will range from short newspaper articles, founding documents, debates and controversies which also expand on material covered in the text and classes. Each week in lecture we will review with you the additional readings for which you are responsible. Be sure to check this folder weekly as this material is integral to the course.

**Required Textbook**
ISBN 978-0-393-91308-8

Please be sure to buy the full 9th edition, which includes policy chapters. This is available at both the University Bookstore and MaryJane Books.

**Requirements**
- **Activities, quizzes, attendance and participation in the lecture, 20%**.
- **Three exams, 10% each**. The dates are reflected on the course schedule below.
- **A final exam, 10%**. The date is scheduled by the University for May 17, 2013 at 8 a.m. Sorry that it’s late in the exam period and so early in the morning, but the rules are the rules. You are required to take the exam at the scheduled time.
- **Discussion sections, 30%**. You have signed up for a Friday discussion section which is a required part of this class. Attendance and participation for that discussion are worth 20% of your grade, and an additional 10% of your grade is based on activities which will contribute to a final course white paper.
- **White paper, 10%**, due April 25th. The white paper and the activities leading up to it will be based on issues that we integrate into both lecture and discussion: guns, immigration and hydrofracking. The gun debate, as we all know, has once again taken center stage at the state and national level. Immigration policy is central to who we are as Americans, a theme emphasized in the text, and hydrofracking—an increasingly popular way to draw on America’s natural gas reserves—is a particular controversy currently prominent in New York State. Your work in section will generate background information on these issues and their connections to course topics on particular weeks. This work will culminate in the white paper due April 25th. More detail surrounding this paper will be provided on a separate handout and supported by work in discussion.

**Course Policies:**
Plagiarism: The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, words, or ideas as if they were your own without giving the original author credit by citing him or her. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please contact us before submitting assignments for grading. Every student is responsible for understanding what constitutes plagiarism and the University’s policy on academic integrity. It is available at [http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/regulations.html](http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/regulations.html)

Plagiarism violations in this course will result in disciplinary action.
Students with Disabilities: If you need any class accommodations due to a disability, please utilize University resources as needed, and please let the professor know well in advance of any assignments requiring accommodation(s). It is a function of the University to provide such accommodations as needed.

COURSE OUTLINE

PART I: Political culture, the founding debate, and our constitutional structure
In this section of the course we examine some of the constants of American politics and how they have developed over time: citizenship, the Constitution, checks and balances, federalism. Debates at the core of the American system that seemed to be settled with the ratification of the Constitution have continued to be challenged. Core principles of our political system – liberty, equality, and democracy—are frequently re-engaged in elections and policy debates, developing new meanings in the process. What are the key features of the American political structure? In what ways have they changed and in what ways are they the same as they were at the founding? What are the key connections between American political culture, its history, and its constitutional design?

Week 1
1/24 Introduction
Why are you here? What do you know about American politics? What do you want to know? How have you participated in the American system? How would you like to? What aspects of American politics do you consider most praise worthy? What aspects do you dislike? How easy are those features to change?
1/25 Discussion

Week 2
1/29 The Founding Read Ginsberg Chapters 1 & 2
We will review the Ratification process with attention to the disagreements between the Federalist and Anti-federalists and their connection to the structure and process of politics then and now. How did our founders differ in their conceptions of human nature, representation, the threat of tyranny, and the appropriate scale and scope of government?
1/31 The Constitution Read Ginsberg Chapter 2
The points of view expressed at the founding found their way into distinct features of our Constitutional design and system. What are the connections? How does the founding debate and the final structure of our political system link to the core values of liberty, equality, and democracy? How does it connect to continuing political debates today?
2/1 Discussion

Week 3
2/5 Federalism Read Ginsberg Chapter 3
One of the key features of the founding debate concerned the role of the state in a national system. Justice Brandeis referred to our fifty states, with a variety of political norms and subcultures and both shared and distinct policy concerns – as “laboratories” of democracy. What were the key debates about state and national power at our nation’s founding? How
has federalism developed overtime? What are some of the ways our state structure influences politics today?
2/7 Civil Liberties Read Ginsberg Chapter 4
Another key feature of the founding conversation was the Bill of Rights. What are the distinct rights contained there and how have they developed over time?

2/8 Discussion

Week 4
2/12 Public Opinion Read Ginsberg Chapter 6
The role of citizens in political decision making is a hallmark of American democracy. What are the ways in which the public can express their preferences, to each other, and to their elected political leadership? How have these mechanisms changed over time? To what extent does our democracy require engaged, capable citizens?
2/14 *** exam ***
2/15 *** no discussions ***

PART II: Civic Engagement and the intermediaries that structure it
The changing nature of our polity, its people and its structures, has been matched by developments in the ways in which citizens can participate in politics and the types of vehicles that help them express preferences to leaders and fellow citizens. In this part of the course we examine citizen engagement in its many forms and assess the variety of intermediaries like political parties, interest groups, elections, and the media that structure and organize participation. These developing features of the American political landscape have a significant impact on who we are and how we participate. What are the key historical developments in who can participate and how we participate? What are the key differences between types of participation and the different places or structures where participation can occur, like political parties, groups, elections, and media, in its many forms?

Week 5
2/19 Civic Engagement and Political Identity Read Blackboard Folder
There are many theories about individual political identity -- what shapes it, what changes it, and how it is expressed. What are the sources of your political identity and how does it mesh with the different theories? What are the different ways in which identity and behavior come together?
2/21 Participation and Voting Read Ginsberg Chapter 8
Voting is one of many forms of participation in a political landscape that has offered opportunities in the last few decades. What are the different types of participation? What are the differences in who participates, when, and in what ways? What are the consequences of these participation inequalities?
2/22 Discussion

Week 6
2/26 Media Read Ginsberg Chapter 7
Changes in the nature of mass media have reverberated across the political landscape influencing how we are informed, engaged, communicate and compete. What functions do
the media perform in politics today? What are the key changes in media and what have these changes meant for its functions?

2/28  Political Parties  Read Ginsberg Chapter 9

Our two party system frustrates many citizens, especially at times when parties seem to do more to obstruct each other than work for citizens and the greater good. How have parties developed since the founding? Why are there only two? What are their strengths and weaknesses when it comes to popular participation and in the role they play for political leaders?

3/1  Discussion

Week 7

3/5  Elections  Read Ginsberg Chapter 10

Elections provide us with a scheduled “say” in choosing our political leadership and influencing public policy. How can and how should we describe the quality of that say? What are the different types of elections we can participate in and how are the participation opportunities they offer distinct? Why do some people participate and others do not?

3/7  Election 2012 and beyond  Read Blackboard Folder

Pundits, pollsters, prognosticators rise and fall on their predictions and their understandings of elections. What are the trends in elections and what do they suggest about public preferences? Let’s examine together the range of ways to analyze 2012 and what it may mean.

3/8  Discussion

Week 8

3/12 Groups and Interests  Read Ginsberg Chapter 11

Interest groups offer citizens an entirely different way to participate in the political system; like parties, “special interests” often seem to work against the greater good. What are the different types of groups and the variety of roles they play in organizing participation and influencing government?

3/14  *** exam ***

3/15  *** no discussion ***  HAVE A GOOD BREAK!!

PART III: American Political Institutions, Rights and Liberties

The workings of the traditional Institutions—Congress, president/bureaucracy and the Judiciary—are at the core of American government. As we learned, the founders worked long and hard to design a checks and balances system that they thought would best translate input from the public and intermediary institutions into policy best for the nation. In this section of the course, we consider how well the founders succeeded and how the various governmental institutions operate today and how they connect. The questions we will consider include: What processes and features are distinct about each institution? In what ways do and should these institutions work as the founders intended? How powerful is each? How democratic? In what ways can citizen participation impact these institutions, and which institution would you yourself want to impact most?
Week 9
3/26  Congress  Read Ginsberg Chapter 12
Congress according to the Constitution is supposed to be the people’s branch and the nation’s premier lawmaking body. What does representation mean and how representative is today’s Congress? How does the lawmaking process work and how is it affected by congressional rules and processes? What is the place, advantages and disadvantages of Congress relative to the other branches of government?
3/28  Congress continued
3/29 Discussion

Week 10
4/2  Presidency  Read Ginsberg Chapter 13
The role of the American President today has transformed from the primarily administrative role envisioned by the Founders to an office with far reaching domestic and foreign policy powers. Does the president have too much power? When thinking about presidents, what is more important, the individual or the institution of the presidency, and why does that matter?
4/4 Bureaucracy  Read Ginsberg Chapter 14
The growth of the executive branch (bureaucracy) more broadly has supported the transformation of the President. What does the bureaucracy do, and in what ways does it augment/diminish the president’s power? What are the ways in which it interacts with the other branches?
4/5 Discussion

Week 11
4/9  The Federal Courts  Read Ginsberg Chapter 15
Through the power of the law, the judicial branch of government was expected to check the more democratically elected branches of government and be the major guarantor of civil rights and liberties. What are the sources of judicial power? How much power does the Court have and how has it changed over time? What is and should be the role of an unelected judiciary in a democracy?
4/11 Civil Rights  Read Ginsberg Chapter 5
The rights that are enshrined in the first ten amendments to the Constitution reflect the worldview of the founders. How have our conceptions of equality and democracy developed and what key rights have been added? What are the different ways in which our institutions, especially the courts, have handled the expansion of civil rights?
4/12 Discussion

Week 12
4/16 Social Movements  Read Blackboard Folder
Social movements have been critical to achieving real gains for a wide array of groups throughout our history. How are movements different from political parties and groups? How have social movements worked to expand the rights of Americans and what factors contribute to their success?
4/18  *** exam ***
4/19  *** no discussion ***
PART IV: Public Policy and the Policy-making process

In this, the final portion of the course we look at the nuts and bolts of the policy making process and the actors and institutions that shape the formulation, execution, and implementation of government decisions. Examining and simulating policy makes sense as a culminating unit – as a process it brings the actors and institutions from our earlier reading together in the business of government -- how individuals, groups, institutions, and political leadership (both elected and unelected) -- work together on public issues and prioritize among competing choices. In each type of policy we examine – economic, social and foreign – distinct players and environmental factors have a role. What are dominant goals in each of these policy areas? What are the fundamental differences within and across them? How do public preferences figure into each policy area, and how should they?

Week 13
4/23 Social Policy Read Ginsberg Chapter 17
The authors of the textbook describe American social policy as reflecting “the nation’s views about which risks should be borne by the individual and which should be shared by society as a whole.” How have these views changed over time and how has policy developed along with those changes? What are the central conflicts today associated with social policy?

4/25 Economic Policy Read Ginsberg Chapter 16
Given the recent talk of the tax cuts, the fiscal cliff and the debt ceiling, many of you may be quite familiar with many of the pieces of economic policy. What are the different theories about the economy and the relationship between the public and private sectors of the economy? How do these theories connect to the different positions political parties and elected leaders take on economic policies?

4/26 Discussion

Week 14
4/30 Foreign Policy Read Ginsberg Chapter 18
There has traditionally been a bright line distinction between foreign policy and domestic policy. What ideas and goals explain that bright line? What conditions make that distinction harder to maintain?

5/2 Making Complex Policy Choices Policy Simulation
The policy making process requires political leaders to make difficult choices when they set priorities. Sometimes those choices provoke passionate debate (and, as important, sometimes they receive scant attention and fly under the radar of most people). What are some of the factors that come together in setting public priorities?

5/3 Discussion

Week 15
5/7 Review and Conclusion

May 17 *** exam *** 8AM