Introduction to American Politics
Spring 2015

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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 whether Democrat Barack Obama rather than Republican Mitt Romney won the 2012 presidential election? What are the different ways we can understand the power that the public has in shaping politics today, or whether they have any at all? What factors influence policymaking on key issues including gun rights, immigration or energy? In this course, we will introduce you to the workings of American politics and its key actors, institutions and policies. 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 examines 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. 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, how come some people become active while others choose not to get involved? And what difference does it make: in what ways do our actions actually have an impact?

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.
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 Sciences 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

We expect you to be a full participant in this class and consider your attention and contributions critical to our learning goals. Class sessions will include lectures, a variety of individual and group exercises, discussions and simulations. We will explore material that sometimes covers and sometimes complements the assigned chapters. Readings should be done in advance of the class session to which they are assigned. We are attentive to your demeanor and engagement; we will come prepared, treat you with respect, and expect the same from you. If you are routinely absent, late, disrespectful, texting, browsing the internet, etc. we will notice.

Service Learning Opportunity: Students interested in engaging questions of citizenship first hand through tutoring a new American can participate in an optional service learning component of this course (and additional credit through RPOS397). This service learning opportunity is offered through a cooperation arrangement between the Albany Office for New Americans and the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and policy. More details will be available in sections.

Course Materials

We will use a textbook and an integrated learning platform called Mindtap in this class. We have included a page on accessing it at the back of this syllabus. We will have a classroom
demonstration of some its features on Tuesday. The textbook is *Gateways to Democracy: An Introduction to American Government, 3rd Edition*, by John G. Geer, Wendy J Schiller, Richard Herrera, and Jeffrey A Segal. The Publisher is Cengage Learning. More information on the textbook (buying vs. renting and for discounts) can be accessed at the following link http://www.cengagebrain.com/micro/1-1W1S3P2

Course Requirements
- a. Quizzes and exercises, in Mindtap and in class 10%.
- b. Three exams, one after each part of the course, 10% for the first (2/19) and 15% for the second (on 4/3) and third (online during finals week).
- c. Three 5 page papers on a public policy, 25% total, supported by activities in lecture and discussion.
- d. Discussion sections, 25%.

(You are enrolled in a Friday discussion section which is a required part of this class. Attendance, participation and the activities in that class to support the preparation of your papers will be worth 25% of the course grade.)

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
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?

Week 1
- 1/22 Introduction
- 1/23 *** No Discussion **
**Week 2**  Big debates at the founding and their Constitutional “resolution”
- 1/27  The Founding  Gateways  Ch 2
- 1/29  The Constitution  Appendices /Mindtap Founding readings

**Week 3**  Federalism: government by the states, the nation or does it depend?
- 2/3  Federalism  Gateways  Ch 3
- 2/5  Federalism  Mindtap folder

**Week 4**  Constitutional framework and modern day controversies
- 2/10  Civil Liberties  Gateways  Ch 4
- 2/12  Civil Rights  Gateways  Ch 5

**Week 5**  An opportunity for you to shine and rest
- 2/17  Reviewing the structure
- 2/19  *** First Exam ***
- 2/20  *** No Discussion ***

**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 6**  How we become who we are and how that impacts what we do
- 2/24  Political Identity  Mindtap folder
- 2/26  Public Opinion  Gateways  Ch 6

**Week 7**  Alternative ways citizens can make a difference --or can they?
- 3/3  Interest Groups  Gateways  Ch 8, Mindtap folder
- 3/5  Political Parties  Gateways  Ch 9

**Week 8**  Linking institutions and how they shape the information environment
- 3/10  Media  Gateways  Ch 7
- 3/12  Media
- 3/13  *** No Discussion ***

*** Spring Break ***
**Week 9** Participation choices and the ways the system structures them
3/24 Voting and Participation   Gateways   Ch 11
3/26 Elections and Campaigns   Gateways   Ch 10

**Week 10** Elections and the possibility of election reform
3/31 Political Reforms
4/2 *** exam ***
4/3 *** no discussion **

**PART III: American Political Institutions and Policy making**
The workings of the traditional Institutions—Congress, president/bureaucracy and the Judiciary—are at the core of American government. Their work together provides the nuts and bolts of the policy making process. 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 final section of the course, we consider how well the founders succeeded and how the various governmental institutions operate today, and how they connect and interact with other actors in politics to develop policy. 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?

**Week 11** The people’s branch? The many dimensions of representation
4/7 Congress   Gateways   Ch 12
4/9 Mindtap folder

**Week 12** The expansion of Leadership in a system of separate institutions sharing power
4/14 Presidency   Gateways   Ch 13
4/16 Mindtap folder

**Week 13** The not so invisible role of the unelected branches
4/21 The Bureaucracy   Gateways   Ch 14
4/23 The Judiciary   Gateways   Ch 15

**Week 14** Public policy goals, values and politics
4/28 Making complex Policy choices   Gateways   Ch 16
4/30

**Week 15** Conclusion and Review
5/5