What’s the first thing you think of when you think about politics? For many of us, the answer to that question has to do with current and controversial issues—climate change, immigration, health care. While it is natural that our opinions on these issues along with the intensity of our beliefs vary, one commonality for most of us is that we don’t spend much time engaging in discussion and dialog on these issues. In fact, if you think about it, the available forums and spaces to do so are surprisingly limited. The first aim of this course then is to deepen your understanding of these issues by providing a space to discuss some of the most important and controversial topics of the day.

But, think a little more carefully: what does it mean to “deepen your understanding” of issues. We will accomplish this aim in a number of ways. While there are no prerequisites to this course, we will review and build on your knowledge base from introductory courses including American politics and public policy to review, in a general way, the factors most important to an understanding of the policy process and the history/events that brought us to the current status quo with respect to particular policies. Mostly, though, this course is experiential; the main way we will go deeper is by engaging in a variety of active learning contexts: discussions, group activities, and in-class simulations. In the course of these activities, you will be asked to take the perspectives of specific players in the policy process, consider different forums where the policy process takes place and of course get a chance to articulate your own views.

Finally, we will go deeper in our understanding of issues by transitioning from the participatory activities we engage in in class to more general discussions of the role of a citizen and citizen participation in a democracy. In what ways should and do individuals participate? Who participates and who doesn’t? And with what consequences? Can ordinary individuals make a difference? Thus, our issue debates will be placed in the broader context of political participation and citizenship, and the first weeks of class will highlight key debates about those concerns. Thereafter, we will intersperse our issue discussions with classes which augment our understanding of what it means to participate in politics as well as the larger society.

In sum, the learning objectives for this class are:

- To identify the debates and important factors underlying an understanding of some of the most current and controversial issues faced by modern day Americans.
- To explain key theories and debates about the role of citizen participation in a democracy.
To engage in a mini-version of political participation by engaging in numerous individual and group activities
- Taking other viewpoints into account and to locate yourself on a continuum: where do you stand on these important current controversies

Note: You need not feel particularly well informed with respect to current events or controversies; it is one purpose of the course to augment your level of information.

Required Readings

There is no single required text for the class. …But of course there is reading! A collection of articles is available on Blackboard including:
- Background readings on aspects of citizenship, participation and the policy process
- Readings on specific policy issues mostly taken from issues of the CQ Researcher.
- For the most part you can expect at least one reading for each class.

Course Requirements:

- Two Midterms (3/5, 20%; 4/9, 20%).
- Final (as scheduled by University- 5/8) – 20%.
- Five 1.5-2 page reaction papers – 20%. You get to choose which ones. Make sure you turn these in!*
- Attendance/participation/reading quizzes (will include class preparation, short 1 page writing assignments, or bring in specified material relevant to class topic of the day) – 20%.

Note: Failure to turn in work will count against you.

*The reaction papers are 1.5 to 2 pages. They will ask you to review a main issue in the reading and then develop your stand on the issue. They will be specific to the issues we will be discussing and you will need to reference specifics from the readings as well as give your reactions.

These papers are intended to be short and to get you thinking. They will be due the class after we have discussed the issue you want to write about. They will be graded on a 1 to 10 scale. Papers should be turned in via e-mail (sfriedman2@albany.edu).

Course Policies

Attendance:
This course has a great deal of in class and collaborative work. You have to come to class. Attendance and accompanied in-class assignments are worth 20% of your grade.

Plagiarism and cheating:
“This one’s simple: don’t do it. Don’t even think about doing it.”—Julie Novcov, Department Chair

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 ask before submitting assignments for grading. Plagiarism violations will result in disciplinary action. Additionally, it goes without saying that you are expected to meet the broader standards of academic honesty expected of students at a major university; see link on University policy: http://www.albany.edu/eas/104/penalty.htm

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

Reading Schedule:
*Schedule subject to change given progress and topic interest. This class will include numerous class simulations and participatory exercises, so we will adjust our schedule accordingly, as we go. You will be given ample notice of any changes so be sure to check your emails!

Weeks 1 and 2 Introduction: Citizen Participation in a Democracy, Overview
*At least two issue papers due prior to exam on 3/5

1/22 Introduction

1/27 No Child Left Behind (CQ Researcher) & Common Core (BlackBoard)

1/29 Food Policy Debates (CQ Researcher)

Weeks 3 and 4: Participation: Initial Distinctions and Perspectives
2/2 Overviewing The State of Participation Today
  Dalton, Russell J. (2008), The Good Citizen, ch. 1

2/4 The Electoral Arena
  Macedo, ch. 2

2/10 Interest Groups (Group Formation, Strategies, Problems, Individual Transformations)
  Group Formation, Strategies, Problems, Individual Transformations?
  Read two: Chapters from Cigler and Loomis (2007), Interest Group Politics. ch. 2 (the enduring power of the NRA); ch. 3 (politics of tribal recognition); ch. 4 (interest groups and advocacy for the disadvantaged); ch. 5 (big-money donors to environmental groups), ch. 11 (is corporate lobbying rational or just a waste of money?); ch. 16 (emerging issues, new organizations: interests groups and the making of nanotechnology policy)

2/12 New Media and Participation (CQ Researcher: Digital Journalism)

Weeks 5 and 6: Policy Debates
2/17 Preparation for Policy Discussions/ Factors Important to Understanding Policy
2/19 Gun Control (CQ Researcher)

2/24 Police Tactics (CQ Researcher)

2/26 Income Inequality (CQ Researcher)

**Weeks 7 and 8: Midterm and more on Participation**

3/3-3/5 Review and Midterm 1

3/10-3/12 Tools and Tactics of Participation

*More to come later*