Introduction to American Politics
Professor: Girma Parris
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Course Description
The goal of this course is for students to become critical, sophisticated observers of contemporary American politics. In this course, we will examine the founding and structure of American government, core themes of American political thought, major political institutions, and present-day political and policy issues. Studying the institutions and development of American government, politics and policies will form the basis for 1) understanding the interplay between government and politics; 2) comparisons among democracies; 3) analyses of key concepts in political thought; and 4) a better understanding of current events and policies. This survey course prepares the students for more advanced level courses dealing with American government / politics as well as Public Policycourses.

Course Requirements
Readings: Class lectures and discussions will go beyond a mere delineation of the basics of American politics. The basics will be applied via discussion to reveal their everyday significance. Each week, readings have been selected for their ability to give students a factual overview of that week’s theme. These readings will facilitate discussion of other readings, many of which assume the reader has some background in the study of American politics. Please complete the readings before class. As class will be used to apply the basics of American politics explained in the readings, reading prior to class is essential. Participation in class discussion will be part of the final grade (see below).

Attendance and participation: Regular attendance to lecture/ discussion section and contributions to class discussion are essential and will account for 25% (10% for section each assignment and 5% for attendance) of your grade

- Students are allowed two excused absences. Additional unexcused absences will result in deductions from your course mark.

- I will lecture for part of the class, but group work and class discussion will also be part of lecture. Participation, however, will be mandatory part of the discussion sections. Participation will be judged more on quality than quantity. Some of the readings can be
quite difficult. Your TA and I will be looking as much at your ability to identify and clearly state difficulties and confusions (your own and those of the author) as well as at your ability to clearly articulate the main points of the text(s), connect the readings to contemporary issues and other theoretical and empirical readings covered throughout the semester.

**Essays:** There will be two paper assignments (approximately 2 pages in length) assigned by your TA, Dave Siracuse. Specifics concerning the written assignment will be communicated to you in your section session.

Presentation: There will be two presentation assignments that you will be asked to deliver in the discussion section. Your TA will provide specifics on the presentation assignments in your discussion section.

**Exams:** Three mandatory in-class exams will determine the major part of your grade. They will assess your knowledge of the subjects covered throughout the semester.

- The course is divided into three themes: The Founding and Political Thought; Institutions of the American Political System; and Issues in American Politics. The first two exams will deal with information from the first two themes of the course. Each exam will be worth 20% (totaling 40%) of your final grade.
- The third exam will test you on the third theme as well as contain a cumulative section. It will account for 30% of your final grade.
- All three exams must be completed in order to receive a grade for the course.

**Course Schedule**

**THEME 1. FOUNDING AND POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**Week 1: Reconciling American Political Thought with American Political Culture**

**Thursday, January 21 -**

Introduction

**Tuesday, January 26 -**

Week 2: Founding and Structure of American Government

Thursday, January 28 –
The Articles of Confederation (1777): http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/artconf.htm
Constitution of the USA (1787):
http://www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/charters/constitution.html

Federalist Papers #10, #51 http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/federal/fed.htm

Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 2

Tuesday, February 2 –

Recommended:

Thursday, February 4 – First midterm exam

THEME II. INSTITUTIONS OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Week 3: American Federalism

Tuesday, February 9 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 3

Thursday, February 11 –
Canon, Coleman, and Mayer, eds. The Enduring Debate: Classic and Contemporary Readings in American Politics: Chapter 3

Week 4: The Congress
Tuesday, February 16 –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We The People (2014): Chapter 12

Thursday, February 18 –


Optional readings:

Week 5: The Presidency

Tuesday, February 23 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 13


Thursday, February 25 –


Week 6: Parties and Elections

Tuesday, March 1 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapters 9 and 10

Thursday, March 3 –
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Week 7: Government of Opinion

**Tuesday, March 8** –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: *We The People* (2014): Chapters 6

**Thursday, March 10** –


*****No Classes Tuesday, March 15 and Thursday, March 17 – Spring Break*****

Week 8: Public Opinion and the Media

**Tuesday, March 22** –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: *We The People* (2014): Chapter 7

**Thursday, March 24** –


Week 9: The Judiciary

Tuesday, March 29 –
Federalist #78 http://lcweb2.loc.gov/const/fed/fedpapers.html

Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 15

Thursday, March 31 –
Canon, Coleman, and Mayer, eds: The Enduring Debate: Classic and Contemporary Readings in American Politics (2013): Chapter 8


Week 10: The Government’s Role in the American Economy

Tuesday, April 5 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 16


Thursday, April 7 – Second Midterm exam

THEME III. ISSUES IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Week 11: The Politics of Race and Immigration

Tuesday, April 5 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 5

Thursday, April 7 –
http://www.thurgoodmarshall.com/speeches/constitutional_speech.htm

http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/cgi-bin/getcase.pl?court=US&navby=case&vol=000&invol=02-241#other2
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Week 12: The Politics of Social Welfare

Tuesday, April 12 –  
Schram, Sanford S., Joe Soss, and Ricard C. Fording. Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform (2003): Chapter 1

http://pantheon.yale.edu/~jhacker/articles.htm

Thursday, April 14 –  


Week 13: The Decline of Social Capital?

Tuesday, April 19 –  
Ginsberg and Crenson: Downsizing Democracy (2004): Chapters 1 and 5

Thursday, April 21 –  
Putnam, Robert D.: “The Strange Disappearance of Civic America”
http://www.prospect.org/web/page.ww?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=4972

“The Tocqueville Files” (special section on Putnam’s “Strange Disappearance” from The American Prospect)
Responses by Theda Skocpol, Michael Schudson, Richard Vallely, and Robert Putnam
http://www.prospect.org/web/page.ww?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=4959
http://www.prospect.org/web/page.ww?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=5056
http://www.prospect.org/web/page.ww?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=4957
http://www.prospect.org/web/page.ww?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=4958

[recommended: Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 8]
Week 14: Terror, National Security—Reconciling National Security and Civil Liberties

Tuesday, April 26

Thursday, April 28
Cole and Dempsey: Terrorism and the Constitution: Sacrificing Civil Liberties In the Name of National Security (2006): Introduction