**POS204 Current Controversies in American Politics**  
**Spring 2016**  
**Humanities #20; MWF 12:35-1:30.**  
**A-E graded**

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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 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, to locate yourself on a continuum: where do you stand on each of 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.

Note: For the most part, we will spend two classes on each of the issues we discuss; day 1 will consist of an initial exercise, some background on the issue and some consideration of the main controversies in the debate. Readings for most of these classes will be based on CQ Researchers (Blackboard). In day 2, you will be asked to go deeper by doing some additional reading on a political aspect of the topic, by going more in-depth in our discussion or in some cases by bringing in readings of your choice that you think will be useful to the class as a whole.

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:

-- Readings on specific policy issues mostly taken from issues of the CQ Researcher (also available under “Data Bases” on the University Library).
-- Background readings on the issues or on citizen participation for some of our day 2 discussions
-- For the most part you can expect at least one reading for each class.

Course Requirements

Two Midterms (3/9 and 4/15) worth 15% and 20% of your grade respectively.

• Final (as scheduled by University- 5/13) – 25%.

• Five approximately 2- page reaction papers–20%. You get to choose which ones but make sure you turn these in!*

• Attendance/participation/reading quizzes (will include class preparation, short writing assignments or coming to class with specified material relevant to the class topic of the day)- 20%. Three times throughout the semester, you will also sign up to bring in an article of your choice that you think will help deepen our discussion and our understanding of an issue. Details to come.

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

*The reaction papers should be approximately two pages. They will ask you to review a main issue in the readings 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. Please let the professor know prior to class if there is an emergency circumstance preventing you from coming.

Plagiarism and cheating:
“This one’s simple: don’t do it. Don’t even think about doing it.”—Julie Novkov, 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 email!*

*At least two issue papers due prior to exam on 3/9

Part I: Introduction and initial issue debates: Citizen Participation in a Democracy,
1/20-1/22 Introduction

1/25-1/27 Guns (CQ Researcher); second day each of you brings in a relevant article about gun policy or about the politics of the topic.

1/29-2/1 Marijuana Industry (CQ Researcher); Day 2, Delli Carpini and Keeter What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters (1996) Ch 2 (Blackboard)

2/3-2/5 No child Left Behind (CQ Researcher) & Common core addendum; Day 2, Tarshis How to Be Your Own Best Editor Ch 1

Part II: Going Deeper: Controversies in Political Participation and Debates on Long Standing Controversies

2/8 Who should participate in politics?
2/10 Are people participating enough?
Dalton, Russell J. (2008), *The Good Citizen*, Ch. 1

2/12 Digital Media; Does IT Expand or Shrink Democracy
Bruce Miroff et al, *Debating Democracy*, Ch. 9; readings by Sunstein (*The Daily We*) and Bennett (Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age)

2/15 President’s Day/Washington’s birthday; no class, at least for us!

2/17-2/19 Wealth and Inequality (CQ Researcher);

2/22-2/24 Racial Conflict (CQ Researcher);

2/26-2/29 Immigration Detention
(CQ Researcher); Day 2, Bruce Miroff et al, *Debating Democracy*, Ch. 4; Does It Strengthen or Threaten Democracy; selections by Wattenberg (Immigration Strengthens American Democracy) and Gingrich (Patriotic Immigration)

3/2-3/4 Millennial Generation
(CQ Researcher); Day 2, Graham, *America, The Owner’s Manual*, Ch. 1, 3

3/7 Review

3/9 Midterm

3/11 No class

*More to come later
*Second midterm; 4/15
*Final exam as scheduled by university; Friday 5/13, 1-3 p.m.