

American Politics RPOS 101 Class # 8382
MWF 12:35 – 1:30 pm HU 0024 3 Credits
University at Albany Spring 2019

Professor Phil Nicholas

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Office Hours: Mondays 2:45 – 3:30 pm, Wednesdays 2:45 – 3:15 pm
or by appointment

Course Description

This course provides a broad examination of the institutions and political organizations that make up the American political system. Students will not just learn the mechanics and facts about American politics, but will also learn the concepts, issues, and debates that are the deeper dynamics of American politics. The course seeks to promote citizenship in the democratic process, and political engagement papers are assigned to improve students' ability to participate in the political process. Students will become familiar with many aspects of contemporary American politics including the separation of powers of the national government, and how power is divided between the national and state governments. The course provides a foundation for the further study of American politics and political science. Read and refer to the syllabus throughout the course, and the syllabus is also posted on blackboard.

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

This course fulfills both the US History and Social Science requirements in the General Education program. The US History and Social Science General Education learning objectives are below and the following links have information about both Social Science and US History learning objectives: <https://www.albany.edu/generaleducation/social-sciences.php> and <https://www.albany.edu/generaleducation/us-history.php>.

Learning Objectives for General Education US History Courses

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.

Learning Objectives for General Education Social Sciences Courses

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.

Required Textbook

Christine Barbour and Gerald Wright, *Keeping the Republic The Essentials 8th Edition* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017).

In addition to the textbook there are a number of readings that will be posted on blackboard for the discussion presentations

January 23 Course Introduction

January 25 Assign Discussion Groups & Political Culture and Ideology

January 28 Red and Blue States View <http://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/president>

January 30 The Revolution and Articles of Confederation Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 3

February 1 & 4 The Constitution and its ratification Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 3 and part of chapter four (TBA), and the Articles of the Constitution at <http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution>

February 6 & 8 Federalism Read *Keeping the Republic* part of chapter 4

February 11 & 13 Congress Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 7

February 15 **Discussion Presentation 1:** Marijuana Policy in the States

February 18 Congress/ Presidency

February 20 **First Exam**

February 22 Presidency Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 8

February 25 **Discussion Presentation 2:** Immigration Policy

February 27 **First Engagement Paper Due**
Presidency/ Judiciary

March 1 Judiciary Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 10

March 4 Civil Rights

March 6 **Discussion Presentation 3:** Minimum Wage Politics

March 8 Civil Rights Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 6

March 11 & 13 Civil Liberties Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 5

March 15 Government Agencies Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 9

Spring Break

March 25 Government Agencies continued

March 27 **Second Engagement Paper Due**
Foreign Policy

March 29 Public Opinion Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 11

April 1 **Second Exam**

April 3 & 5 Political Parties Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 12

April 8 **Discussion Presentation 4:** Environmental Politics and Policy

April 10 **Discussion Presentation 5:** The Trump Presidency

April 12 & 15 Campaigns and Elections Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 14

April 17 **Third Engagement Paper Due**
Presidential Nomination and General Election

April 19 **Discussion Presentation 6:** Elections in the States

April 22 & 24 Interest Groups Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 13

April 26 Theories of Power in American Politics

April 29 and May 1 Economic and Social Policy

May 3 Federal Budget

May 6 To be announced

May 8 Review

May 11 (Saturday) Final Exam 10:30am

Grading Scale

A 94 and above A- 90-93.9 B+ 86.7-89.9 B 83-86.6 B- 80-82.9 C+ 77-79.9 C 73-76.9
C- 70-72.9 D+ 66-69.9 D 60- 65.9 E below 60

Grades will be computed as follows:

63% Exams (First Exam 19% Second Exam 21% Final Exam 23%)

12% Discussion Paper 10% Class Participation 1.5% Discussion Presentation

13.5% Three Engagement Papers (4.5% each)

Grades will be based on three examinations, one discussion paper, a discussion presentation, three engagement papers, and class participation. The exams will be closed book and comprise a mix of short essay, short answer, and multiple-choice questions. Any material we cover in class is fair game for the exams and this includes discussion presentation material and current events. Some exam material will also come from sections of the readings that we did not cover in class, and some will be from my own material that I bring to class that is not in the textbook or other assigned readings. Students must only write exam answers on exam paper provided by the professor. During exams, students cannot leave the classroom for bathroom breaks or other reasons. Once students leave the classroom during an exam, by doing so, they have completed their exam.

Make-up exams will only be given in extreme circumstances (illness; death in the family), and students must contact the professor immediately (within 24 hours) and present documentation. Make up exams can be more difficult than the original exam because some of the obvious questions have been asked on the original exam. The final exam date and time is scheduled by the university, and students cannot take the final exam at a different time.

Class participation is worth 10% of the course grade. The class participation grade is not an attendance grade—though students absent from class have difficulty participating. The following actions are examples of highly valued participation and these include: Attempts to answer questions raised by the professor, asking the professor to clarify material in class or raising questions or comments about the material (either in class or through other communication), participating during class discussions, and reacting to statements of other students. Prepare for class participation by completing the assigned readings. Class participation is graded on a class by class basis. If overall class participation is poor, the class will receive a warning (either in class, electronically, or both). If participation does not improve the professor will give short in-class writing assignments based on the

readings to assess student understanding. Students who disrupt class during lectures, discussion presentations, or exams can forfeit up to half their class participation score.

Along with a group discussion presentation, students are required to write a **discussion paper** that is opinion-driven (not just a summary of the readings). The minimum length of this paper is three full double-spaced pages (not including the title, works cited section, or running headers). Other format requirements of the paper include 12 point *Times New Roman* font with 1¼ inch margins. The discussion paper must be opinion driven where you provide your thoughts on at least one of the assigned discussion readings, and **use an additional source** of your own, aside from wikipedia. This outside source must be cited in the body of the paper to show how it contributed to the paper (the same goes for additional outside sources). Each student writes their own discussion paper and it is submitted at class time on the date of the presentation in hard copy (no group papers). The paper must contain some material from the assigned discussion readings. Discussion presentation dates on the syllabus may change. Discussion papers not handed in hard copy at class time on the day of the discussion will be downgraded.

Students are encouraged to review university policies regarding academic honesty. http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/regulations.html In short, plagiarism is taking something that is not yours and passing it off as your own work. This can happen through sloppy research that fails to cite where information comes from, or by copying published or website text without quotation. When borrowing material (whether quoting or paraphrasing), students are required to cite sources in-text. When quoting material, use quotation marks and provide an immediate reference to the source of the material, and if paraphrasing feel free to cite sources on a paragraph by paragraph basis. Failure to cite sources on papers or cheating on examinations is academically dishonest and severely punished at the University at Albany.

This syllabus will experience minor changes such as additional reading assignments. I communicate with the class via email, so students are required to check their university email on a daily basis (except Fridays, Saturdays, and holidays). It is the responsibility of students to be aware of any alterations in the course schedule. If absent from class, obtain notes from other classmates. Extra credit assignments are not provided on an individual basis. Students are required to retain their exams and written work throughout the semester and be able to produce them upon request.

Reasonable accommodations will be provided for students with documented physical, sensory, systemic, cognitive, learning and psychiatric disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring accommodation in this course please notify the Director of the Disability Resource Center (Campus Center 130, 518-442-5490, DRC@albany.edu). That office will provide the instructor with verification of your disability, and will recommend appropriate accommodations.

Incomplete grades may be given when a student has nearly completed the course requirements but for circumstances beyond the student's control, a small portion of the work has not been completed. The full University policy on incomplete grades can be viewed at <https://www.albany.edu/undergraduateeducation/grading.php>

Political Engagement Papers

Three engagement papers can be completed on three of the following five topics (you do not need to do them in numerical order): Research a local political party organization; write a letter to a

public official; summarize and critique a federal grant program; draft a letter to the editor of a newspaper; describe the absentee ballot process in your home state. These have to be activities that take place after January 22, 2018. **The engagement papers must be submitted on blackboard.** Final due dates are listed on the course schedule.

Engagement papers submitted more than one week late will receive a 20% lateness penalty regardless of the reason for the late submission. The required length of the paper is at least **250 words**, not including work cited material. The average length of engagement papers is slightly over 300 words. The entire paper must be in your own writing (do not use quotation), and cite your sources if any. These are independent assignments that you complete on your own, not with friends, parents, or high school teachers, and most questions directed to the professor about the papers will go unanswered. **Write these papers in paragraph form—not in question answer form.**

Activity 1: Describe the absentee ballot application process in your home state.

- a. Disclose the state.
- b. Where can one find the absentee ballot application? Include the website address if you found it online.
- c. Who is eligible to vote via an absentee ballot in your state?
- d. What are the deadlines for submitting an absentee ballot application?
- e. Where do you mail the actual absentee ballot to vote?
- f. Is it easy to apply for an absentee ballot? Explain your answer.
- g. Offer and explain one recommendation to make the absentee ballot application process easier (A recommendation that a government could adopt).

Activity 2: Research a **town, city, or county-level political party** in either your hometown or university residence. Make sure you are researching a political party not some other type of group.

If the political party in your town, city, or county does not have a website, you can use a website from a nearby city or county (even if this city or county is in another state). Students who choose to research a third political party can focus their paper on a state-level party or a town, city, or county organization. The paper can be descriptive or more opinion-driven (or a combination of the two).

- a. What is the party's website url?
- b. What political issue or message is the party trying to convey on its website?
- c. Who is a candidate the party is currently working to elect this year, or a candidate in a prior election? -- the paper format is continued on the following page --

- d. What is an issue position of the above candidate?
- e. What can (or should) the party do to improve its website to communicate more effectively with citizens?
- f. Aside from the local political party website, incorporate another source that provides some information about the party organization, or use a source that focuses on a candidate who appeared on the political party's website (this second source cannot be from the same website as the political party website). Cite this source in the body of your paper (in-text citation) to show where it contributed, and have a full citation at the end of the paper. The candidate does not have to be a current party candidate in 2019, but could have run for elective office in either 2018 or 2017.

Activity 3: Summarize and critique a federal government grant program

The national or what we call the federal government has about 1,300 grant programs according to Jay Dilger at the Congressional Research Service, and these grants are given to states, local governments, or nonprofits. Choose a grant program where the federal government provides funding (money) to the states, local governments, or nonprofits to use under certain guidelines. You can choose any grant program **except the following five** that we will cover in class: Medicaid, Federal-Aid Highways, Drug Free Communities Support Program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and the Community Development Block Grant. Feel free to choose any other grant program, and make certain that it is an actual grant program (not a loan or some other type of assistance).

The federal government website <https://www.usa.gov/grants> has information about grants provided by the national government, but you do not have to choose a grant found on this website. The website also explains the difference between loans and grants. This paper must be written about a grant, not a loan. The report written by Jay Dilger at the Congressional Research Service is posted in content on blackboard. It provides a good overview of grants.

- a. Please note the name of the grant. It must currently exist.
- b. What does the grant program fund in terms of aid, social services, law enforcement (etc.)?
- c. Is the grant only for very specific uses or more broad ones?
- d. Which federal government agency (or bureau in an agency) administers the grant?
- e. Do you consider the grant program effective?
- f. How could the federal government change the grant program to make it more effective or efficient?

Activity 4: Write a letter to a specific **current** public official (anyone in a national, state, or local government elected or appointed office) (can be emailed)

- a. Why did you choose to write this particular official? Explain your answer. This is an important part of the assignment! Do not contact members of Congress with matters they cannot directly influence, like garbage collection. Clearly explain to the official why you are contacting him or her about the issue.
- b. How did you find out where to contact the official?
- c. Did the official respond, and if so briefly describe his or her response and whether it met your satisfaction.
- d. Attach a copy of your email or letter. Both the letter and explanation of the letter contribute toward the required length of the paper.

Activity 5: Draft a letter to the editor of a newspaper that has a hard copy circulation (Hint! Fox is not a newspaper).

- a. Write the letter about an article related to government that appeared in the newspaper in the prior week. State the newspaper, author, title, and date of the article. Note the website address if you read it online. If students choose to complete both activities three and four, this paper must not contain the same text as a letter to a public official (Activity 4).
- b. State why you are motivated to write the letter (aside from the engagement assignment).
- c. What is the address for submitting letters to the editor, and what does the newspaper consider an acceptable length of a letter to the editor?
- d. Attach your letter/email to the above information.
- e. Begin the letter to the editor by summarizing the newspaper article (in 100 words or less).
- f. Write the letter in a persuasive tone. This is very common in newspaper letters to the editor.
- g. Because letters to the editor of newspapers may be published, the letters will be graded based on writing quality to a greater extent than other engagement assignments, and should not contain awkward sentences, grammatical errors, or the overuse of contractions (no more than one contraction).
- h. Letters to the editor do not need to actually be submitted to newspapers. In the letter do not mention you are a University at Albany student, or that you are writing the letter for a course.**