

Political Science 204
Topics: Reforming Elections

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With a bitter battle between parties over control of Congress behind us and the Presidential election of 2016 beginning to take shape, there is quite a bit of interest in the political power at stake in the year ahead. Elections are a key moment in our democratic political system and how they unfold is a topic of interest to many players in the political system. This course looks closely at the processes we use to organize citizen participation and choose political leadership. We examine several enduring electoral trouble spots, evaluate the merits of a variety of reform proposals, and consider how they might influence the American political process. The rules that structure political decisions, both in elections and by elected leaders, influence the behavior of all the participants and have significant implications for the quality of public participation and representation in our democracy.

TEXTS

There are no required books. All required readings are on Blackboard.
The course will require use of an i-clicker2.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- (1) Knowledge of the historical roots and political institutions that contribute to current election practices
- (2) An understanding of the opportunities and obstacles for change in the rules and practices associated with elections
- (3) An understanding of the democratic values associated with the conduct of elections and how those values are connected and related
- (4) The ability to analyze and assess the strengths and weaknesses of proposals designed to reform elections
- (5) Appreciation of the benefits of cooperative work and group problem solving

ACADEMIC HONESTY:

It is essential that students understand, appreciate and model the highest standards of academic integrity. The University's policy regarding what constitutes plagiarism and the penalty is available at <http://www.albany.edu/eas/104/penalty.htm> There is also a useful tutorial available at the University library website that can clarify the issue and provide strategies and best practices to avoid it <http://library.albany.edu/usered/ncplaga/index.html>
Violations of academic integrity will be reported to the Office of Undergraduate Education and will result in failure of this course.

READING ASSIGNMENTS

Due to the format of the course, students should read through as much of the *Background and Problem* reading in each unit before we start our class discussions of the topic. The Readiness Assessment Tests (RAT) will always cover material in the Background and Problem portion of the Learning Module associated with each section of the course. The Partner profiles will concern the sources for solutions. The dates below are suggested so that you can get the most out of our discussions on each topic.

Nominating Candidates for Office (Readiness Assessment Test: August 31)

Readings: Syllabus, Nominating Candidates Background folder **by August 28**

Readings: Nominating Candidates Solutions Folder **by September 2**

Presidential Nomination Process (Readiness Assessment Test: September 18)

Readings: Presidential Nomination Background/Problems **by September 16**

Readings: Presidential Nomination Solutions **by September 25**

Civic Engagement and Participation (Readiness Assessment Test: October 9)

Readings: Civic Engagement and Participation Background/Problems folder **by October 7**

Readings: Civic Engagement and Participation Solutions **by October 14**

Financing Campaigns (Readiness Assessment Test: November 4)

Readings: Financing Campaigns Background/Problems **by November 2**

Readings: Financing Campaigns Solutions **by November 9**

Electoral College (Readiness Assessment Test: December 6)

Readings: Other Reform Options Background and Problem **by December 2**

COMPONENTS OF GRADES

There will be three major areas that contribute to course grades: Individual Performance, Team Performance and Team Contribution.

Individual Performance: There are three components to the individual portion of the grade.

There will be five 10 question multiple choice Readiness Assessment Tests (RATs) given during the course. They will occur close to the beginning of each reform unit (see schedule above) and cover only the material from the introduction and discussion of the problem associated with the reform. Each student will also complete a short, in class reflection at the end of the each unit. There will also be a final take home exam due December 17th that will be based on individual work. I will distribute the choices for that essay during our last class meeting and will expect your papers to be 6-8 pages in length.

Group Performance: The same RATs that are given to individuals will be completed by the teams in class directly after their individual administration. In addition, each team member will be responsible for preparing a partner profile for the rest of the team. These partners are reform groups that contribute to political solutions. On pre-determined dates across the semester we will have presentations about these partners in teams and in class. During the Solutions phase of each reform discussion, teams will complete cooperative solutions to the reform problems which will be evaluated by the instructor and other teams.

Team Contribution: Each individual will rate the helpfulness of all of the other members of their team mid-semester and at the final class meeting. The mid-semester evaluation will be advisory, only the final Team Contribution rating will count. Scores will be the average of the points each student receives from the members of their team. Assuming arbitrarily that (1) team contribution is worth 10 points, and (2) that there are six members on a team, an example of this procedure would be as follows: Each individual must assign a total of 50 points to the other five members in their team. Raters must differentiate some in their ratings (This means that each rater would have to give at least one score of 11 or higher – with a maximum of 15—and at least one score of 9 or lower). As a result Team Contribution scores will produce differences in grades only within teams. Team members can't help everyone in their team get an A by giving them a higher peer evaluation score. The only way for everyone in a team to earn an A is by doing an outstanding job on individual and team exams and projects.

Grade Weights: these percentages, within the boundaries set, will be determined for the whole class by team representatives (acting in consultation with their team) in class on 9/9

**Grade Weights and %
Within area of Total**

Individual Performance (minimum = 65%).....	_____ %
Individual RAT scores (minimum 50%)	_____ %
Individual Debrief reflections	_____ %
In class exercises (in class work and reading readiness work)	_____ %
Final Paper.....	_____ %
Team Performance (minimum = 10%).....	_____ %
Team Readiness Assessments (minimum 50%).....	_____ %
Partner Profiles.....	_____ %
Solution Presentations	_____ %
Team Contribution (Evaluated by team peers – minimum = 10%)	_____ %
	100%

Extra credit questions: Each week at least ONE question will be designated as extra credit. If **all** of a team’s members are in attendance and **all** get the answer correct, the team will earn an extra credit points to add to its Team performance grade.

DETERMINATION OF FINAL GRADES:

The final grades will be determined as follows: 1) a raw total score will be computed for each student in each major performance area: in the individual performance area, this will be weighted combination of the sum of the individual RATs, the debrief reflections, and the final paper score, and in class exercises; in the team performance area, this will be the sum of the scores on each of the graded team assignments and the team’s average score for the partner profiles, and any extra credit points earned; the Team Contribution score will be an average of the peer evaluations received from all members of a student’s team, 2) Students’ total scores will be computed by multiplying the raw scores in each area by the grade “weight” set by the class (see above), 3) Course grades will be based on each individual’s standing in the overall distribution of total individual scores within the class.

Introduction – Choosing Political Candidates (and Parties)

8/26	Orientation to the Course, Form Teams
8/28	Discussion of Nomination Process – Nomination Problem Folder
8/31	RAT – Unit #1
9/2	Solutions discussion - Nomination Solutions Folder
9/4	Solutions exercise and presentations
9/7	*** no class ***
9/9	Debrief, set course weights, LAST DAY TO DROP is 9/9

Choosing Presidential nominees

9/11	Discussion of Presidential Nomination Process – Presidential Problem Folder
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9/14 *** no class ***
 9/16 Discussion of Presidential Nomination
 9/18 RAT – Unit #2
 9/21 Solutions discussion – Presidential Solutions Folder ***partner profile presentations**
 9/23 *** no class ***
 9/25 Solutions discussion – Presidential Solutions Folder
 9/28 Solutions presentation
 9/30 Debrief

Civic Engagement and Participation

10/2 Civic Engagement Problem Introduction
 10/5 Civic Engagement Problem Discussion
 10/7 Civic Engagement Problem Discussion
 10/9 RAT – UNIT #3
 10/12 Discussion of Engagement Solutions ***partner profile presentations**
 10/14 Discussion of Engagement Solutions
 10/16 Engagement exercise
 10/19 Presentation of Solutions
 10/21 Debrief
 10/23 *** Mid-semester Course and Team Evaluations ***

Funding Political Campaigns

10/26 Campaign Finance Problem Introduction
 10/28 Campaign Finance Problem Discussion
 10/30 Campaign Finance Problem Discussion
 11/2 Campaign Finance Problem Discussion
 11/4 RAT –Unit # 4
 11/6 Discussion of Campaign Finance Solutions ***partner profile presentations**
 11/9 Discussion of Campaign Finance Solutions
 11/11 Work on Campaign Finance Exercise
 11/13 Solutions presentations
 11/16 Solutions presentations
 11/18 Campaign Finance Debrief

Electoral College

11/20 Electoral College Problem Introduction
 11/23 Electoral College Problem Discussion
 11/25 *** no class ***
 11/27 *** no class ***
 11/30 Electoral College Problem Discussion
 12/2 RAT – UNIT #5
 12/4 Discussion of Electoral College Solutions ***partner profile presentations**
 12/7 Solution Presentations
 12/9 Debrief, Final Group Evaluations, Take Home Distributed

 12/17 High Noon - Final Essay Due HU16