American Politics  RPOS 101  Class # 10049  
MWF 9:20am – 10:15am  BB B010  3 Credits  
University at Albany  Fall 2018  

Professor Phil Nicholas  
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Office: Rockefeller College Contact Office  —  Humanities B-16  
Office Hours: Mondays 10:45am – 11:15am, Wednesdays 12:30pm – 1:30pm  
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 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  

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


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

August 27  
**Course Introduction**

August 29  
Assign Discussion Groups  
Political Culture  
The Red and Blue States

August 31  
Class canceled (academic conference)  Out of class assignment TBA

September 3  
Labor Day (no class)

September 5  
American Revolution and Creation of the Constitution  
Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter three

September 7  
Creation of the Constitution continued  
Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter three and part of chapter four (TBA)

September 10  
No Class (Rosh Hashanah)

September 12  
The Articles of the Constitution -- Read the Constitution  
It can be found online at for example [http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution](http://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution)

September 14 and 17  
Federalism  
Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter four

September 19  
No Class (Yom Kippur)

September 21  
Federalism/Congress
September 24  **Discussion Presentation 1**: Marijuana Policy in the States

September 26 and 28  Congress  Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter seven

October 1  **First Exam**

October 3  Congress/Presidency

October 5  **Discussion Presentation 2**: Immigration Reform

October 8  **First Engagement Paper due on blackboard**

Presidency  Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter eight

October 10  Judiciary  Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 10

October 12  Judiciary/Civil Rights

October 15  Civil Rights  Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 6

October 17  **Discussion Presentation 3**: Minimum Wage Politics

October 19 and 22  Civil Liberties  Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 5

October 24  **Second Engagement Paper due on blackboard**

October 26 and 29  Government Agencies  Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter nine

October 31  **Second Exam**

November 2  Public Opinion  Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 11

November 5  **Discussion Presentation 4**: The 2018 Congressional Elections

November 7  Election Recap  Watch CNN or cnn.com

November 9  **Discussion Presentation 5**: Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations

November 12 and 14  Political Parties  Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 12

November 16  **Discussion Presentation 6**: The Trump Presidency

November 19  Campaigns and Elections  Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 14

Thanksgiving Break

November 26  **Third Engagement Paper due on blackboard**

Elections continued/ Presidential Nomination and General Election
November 28    Interest Groups    Read *Keeping the Republic* chapter 13
November 30    Economic and Social Policy    readings to be announced
December 3    Federal Budget
December 5    Foreign Policy    readings to be announced
December 7    Theories of Power
December 10    Review

December 17 (Monday 3:30pm) **Final Exam**

**Grading Scale**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>94 and above</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90-93.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>86.7-89.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83-86.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>80-82.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>77-79.9</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>73-76.9</td>
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<td>C-</td>
<td>70-72.9</td>
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<td>66-69.9</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>60-65.9</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>below 60</td>
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Grades will be computed as follows:

64% Exams (First Exam 18%   Second Exam 22%   Final Exam 24%)
12% Three Engagement Papers (4% each)
12% Discussion Paper    10% Class Participation    2% Discussion Presentation

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.

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 1¾ 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. Students who are not present on the second class meeting will be assigned to a discussion group later in the semester. 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.
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): Attend an Albany City Council meeting; research a local political party organization; write a letter to a public official; 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 August 27, 2018.

The engagement papers must be submitted on blackboard. Students are encouraged to write them early in the semester, and there are final due dates 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 one entire page (double-spaced with the same font and margins as the discussion paper noted above). All material must be in your own words (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?

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, but could have run for elective office in 2016 or 2017.

Activity 3: Attend an Albany City Council Meeting

a. What was the date, time, and location of the meeting?

b. How many people were in attendance (roughly) and describe their demographic characteristics (age, sex, race, and any other observable characteristics you believe are important)?

c. What were the number of government officials in attendance?

d. Describe the atmosphere of the meeting. Was it formal or informal? Were people respectful of one another?

e. What was the most significant accomplishment of the meeting, or an issue that was discussed at length?

f. If possible, attach a copy of the meeting agenda to your report.

Students who choose this assignment are encouraged to attend the meeting in pairs and be aware of their surroundings in the downtown Albany environment.
**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 (this can help satisfy the one full-page length requirement).

**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 3).

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. 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).

g. **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.