

Political Science 204: Current Controversies in American Politics

- Business Administration, Room 130
- Monday, Wednesday, Friday 12:35pm to 1:30pm
- Instructor: Steven Koczak
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- Office Hours: Rockefeller College contact office (Humanities Building basement), Fridays, 2pm to 3pm

This course is, at heart, a course on political values, political thought, and political discourse: What political things do we hold dear, what political things we think or think about, what we say about politics and political things, and how we say what we say.

Process and Policy

The list of topics that can fit into this course's title is nearly infinite, but we'll be focusing on four. Two of the four primarily relate to the *means* of politics. I call these “process issues.” Broadly speaking, process issues can be rephrased as “how” questions. How are we going to conduct ourselves politically?

The other two topics relate primarily to the ends of politics, to the public policies that politicians and interest groups seek to enact or block the enactment of, through the political process. I call these “policy” topics. Broadly speaking, policy issues can be rephrased as “what” questions. What are we trying to do? What policies are we trying to enact?

The distinction between process issues and policy issues can be made, but it is not a neat or clean one.

Here are some additional examples, beyond what we'll cover in the class, of “policy” topics.

- The Iraq war.
- The death penalty.
- The minimum age to legally hunt big game, such as bears.

And here are some additional examples, beyond what we'll cover in the class, of “process” topics.

- Campaign finance reform.
- The Presidential or Gubernatorial veto power.
- What parliamentary procedures will the New York State Senate follow.

As you can see policy and process issues can vary considerably in how weighty or “important” they appear to be. I urge you to remember, however, that almost every issue, be it process or policy, is of critical importance to someone. Politicians' power sometimes rise and fall on the basis of decisions over parliamentary procedures, and I once witnessed a bitter debate in the New York State Senate that revolved around the minimum age to hunt big game.

Every political decision made, be it one of policy or process, helps someone and hurts someone. That is the great and undeniable tragedy of political life: Everything you do, or do not do, hurts someone.

The Four Topics/Class Schedule

It should of course go without saying that this “schedule” is to be considered tentative. This schedule,

or anything in the syllabus really, may have to be changed due to circumstances.

We have 41 sessions of this class. Each of the four topics will be covered in approximately 9 to 10 sessions. There is never such a thing as “just the right amount” of time for talking about politics. It's either too much or too little. We'll adjust our time frame as we go.

The first class session, August 29, will be devoted to getting to know one another on a basic level, going over this syllabus, and the like.

Process Topic One: Civility in politics, and the Culture Wars

This is really two highly-related issues. Are Americans deeply divided into “red states” and “blue states?” If so, do the divisions represent a “culture war,” as some have argued since at least the early 1990s? If there really is a “culture war,” can we ever be expected to do anything but hate one another? Disturbingly, given the high stakes game that politics is, perhaps getting along too much to ask? Maybe we *should* hate each other, if the differences between us are really that fundamental. Isn't it a form of corruption to hate someone in private and then get along with him in public?

Required Reading:

- Morris Fiorina, *Culture War?*

Recommend Readings:

- James Hunter, *Culture Wars* (in the library)
- Steven Smith, *Party Influence in Congress* (in the library)
- Sunil Ahuja, *Congress Behaving Badly* (in the library)
- Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders, *Is Polarization a Myth?* (on the Internet)

Class Sessions:

August 31 through September 26

- August 31 through September 26, Fiorina, roughly 2 chapters per class session

Process Topic Two: Corruption and Scandal

Politicians are *all* corrupt, aren't they? Or is it just that, as a great political theorist named Michael Walzer once suggested, politicians rule over us, we think the pleasures of ruling are greater than the pleasures of being ruled, and hence we hate them? Is all corruption created equal? Are scandals always bad? Is it even possible to have a “moral politician?” There are many kinds of scandals. Some involve misuse of power, some involve sex, some involve outright bribe-taking or similar activities. And some merely involve dirty pictures on Twitter.

Required Readings:

- Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” (available on the Internet and on, probably, reserve)
- Michael Walzer, “Political Action: the Problem of Dirty Hands” (available on library databases)
- Joseph F. Zimmerman, *Curbing Unethical Behavior in Government* (on reserve)
- Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (available online, and on reserve, and for cheap at many bookstores)

Recommended Reading:

- Basically anything you can get your hands on about any political scandal could potentially be of use.

Class Sessions

September 28 through October 17

- No readings for September 28
- October 3, 5, 7, Machiavelli
- October 10, Weber
- October 12, Walzer
- October 14, Zimmerman, Chapters 1 and 10
- October 17, free-form discussion of political scandals (such free-form discussion will also likely occur throughout the weeks as well)

October 19: Take-Home Midterm (aka first paper) due during class session. (See below.)

Policy Topic One: Gay Marriage

Everyone knows what this issue is based on the name alone; it doesn't have to be explained much beyond that, in outline. Further, everyone pretty much knows where he or she stands on it, instinctively. But, beyond that clear outline, things can again get a little fuzzy. This topic is being played out mostly, but not exclusively, at the state level, and we'll have a chance to look at the gay marriage law enacted in New York State just this past Summer.

Required Readings:

- Craig A. Rimmerman and Clyde Wilcox, *The Politics of Same-Sex Marriage*
- New York State's "gay marriage bill"

Class Sessions

October 21 through November 11

- Rimmerman and Wilcox; Rom; Riggle and Rostosky; Shaiko; Wald and Glover; Campbell and Robinson; Cahill; Tadlock, Gordon, and Popp; Wilcox, Brewer, Shames, and Lake; Rayside (roughly one or two articles per class session)
- New York State's "gay marriage bill"

Policy Topic Two: Torture

Torture is, as a general rule bad, and illegal. But is it *always* bad? Does torture even work? Meaning, is it an effective means of getting information and obtaining control over someone. If it's not, which is far from clear, then why is it still such a live topic? If it doesn't work, why do we continually take the moral and legal risk and do it anyway?

Required Readings:

- Charles Fried and Gregory Fried, *Because it is Wrong*
- Selected readings from Intelligence Science Board, *Educating Information: Interrogation, Science and Art* (available from me via E-Mail, or on electronic reserve, or on the Internet)

Class Sessions:

November 14 through December 7

- Fried and Fried, entire book, several chapters per class session
- Scattered readings from the U.S. government book aforementioned, at irregular intervals.

December 16: Take-Home Final (aka last paper) due. (See below.)

Assignments and Grading

Grades will be determined by a combination of a take-home midterm, a take-home final, class attendance, and class participation.

Printed copies of the papers are preferable.

The Midterm

- A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you will summarize the two “process” issues covered in class, show me that you have read the required materials, and understood and digested them, and bring in outside materials where appropriate. You must come to some kind of considered analytical conclusion either about each topic in isolation or about both topics together or about the political process in general. (*How I felt about this stuff.*) It should go without saying that your analytical conclusion should have some connection to your summaries. OR:
- A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you will argue that I missed the boat entirely when I picked these two process issues to focus on, there's another process issue that you feel is much more important. This option is harder than the first. *You must still demonstrate to me that you have done the required class readings, and must make a good go at convincing me of your case.*

The midterm will be worth 100 points.

- 100 to 95: A
- 94 to 90: B+
- 89 to 85: B
- 84 to 80: B-
- 79 to 75: C+
- 74 to 70: C
- 69 to 65: C-
- 64 to 60: D
- 59 and below: Failure.

Feel free to come to me if you need more guidance on the midterm. The assignments are, I recognize, pretty vague.

The take-home midterm will be due on October 19, **during class**. You are advised to begin working on it considerably in advance of this date.

The Take-Home Final

- A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you will summarize the two “policy” issues covered in class, show me that you have read the required materials, and understood and digested them, and bring in outside materials where appropriate. You must come to some kind of considered analytical conclusion either about each topic in isolation or about both topics together or about the political process in general. (*How I felt about this stuff.*) It should go without saying that your analytical conclusion should have some connection to your summaries. OR:
- A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you will argue that I missed the boat entirely when I picked these two policy issues to focus on, there's another process issue that you

feel is much more important. This option is harder than the first. *You must still demonstrate to me that you have done the required class readings, and must make a good go at convincing me of your case.* OR:

- A paper of approximately 5 to 10 pages in length wherein you in some way link **one** of the process issues to **one** of the policy issues.

The final will be worth 100 points.

- 100 to 95: A
- 94 to 90: B+
- 89 to 85: B
- 84 to 80: B-
- 79 to 75: C+
- 74 to 70: C
- 69 to 65: C-
- 64 to 60: D
- 59 and below: Failure.

Feel free to come to me if you need more guidance on the final. I recognize that the assignments are pretty vague.

The take-home final will be due on December 16, **by 5pm Eastern the latest**. I will arrange a method by which I will pick up, or you will deliver, the papers. As is the case with the midterm, you are advised, strongly, to begin writing your paper considerably in advance of the due date.

All page counts requirements could be considered approximate. Papers longer than 10 pages are acceptable, but rambling will not help. A paper that is shorter than 4 pages will have its work cut out for it; these are not topics that are easy to deal with in less than 4 pages.

The total grade for the class will be based on 200 points. The basic points are 100 points for each take-home examination/paper. You will be deducted 2 points for every unexplained absence beyond 4. (I'm giving you a free pass for about 10% of the 41 class sessions.) Decent class participation may get you 10 extra points. Lack of participation in class **at all** may result in up to 10 points being deducted. Improvement between the first paper (midterm) and the second paper (final) will work to your advantage.

- 200 to 190: A
- 189 to 180: B+
- 199 to 170: B
- 169 to 160: B-
- 159 to 150: C+
- 149 to 140: C
- 139 to 130: C-
- 129 to 120: D
- 119 and below: E, or "Failure."

It would be a grave disappointment to me to have to fail any of you. I am considered a hard grader, though I came into this business intending to be an easy grader, but I specifically want you to succeed

in my class, and all of your classes.

Extra Credit

For extra credit, feel free to do more than one of the possible final or midterm assignments. Or to approach me with some other paper you would like to write. An example might be an exploration of how the gay marriage issue played out in some other state, or how the culture wars, if they really exist at all, might play in the 2012 Presidential Election. Extra credit can never entirely make up for poor performance on your required assignments but it can't hurt you.

Class Sessions and Other Matters

The sessions for this class will be an odd mix of non-participatory lectures, participatory lectures, guided discussions, and sometimes we'll just watch relevant videos or listen to relevant radio broadcasts. (This is the beauty of having one of those "smart classrooms.")

You should always come prepared, having done the required readings. While there may not be room to express your knowledge in every class session, you know it goes: The one time you haven't done the readings is when I'll end up calling on you.

If there is something specific you may be held responsible for in the next session, beyond what's conveyed in this syllabus, I will let you know. If there's no particular things you'll be held responsible for mentioned, assume you are to make steady, reasonable progress on the required readings for the topic under consideration.

I encourage you to exchange contact information, study together, and help each other out if you think it will be of use to you.

About the Teacher/Contact Information

I, Steven Koczak, am a PhD student here at the University at Albany. I have had a long and strange career in politics, academia, and government. I am currently writing a doctoral dissertation and expect to finish in the Fall Semester of 2011 or the Spring Semester of 2012. I count as my former students a sitting Member of the New York State Assembly and a sitting New York State Senator.

As to what to call me, Mister Koczak will do.

I may be contacted at 518-754-6423 or, preferably, though E-Mail at stevenkoczak@hotmail.com.

I will keep office hours at the Political Science uptown campus contact office (basement of the Humanities Building) at 2pm to 3pm every Friday afternoon, or by appointment. I will establish additional office hours as needed.