Introduction to American Politics

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Course Description
The goal of this course is for students to become critical, sophisticated observers of contemporary American politics. In this course, we will examine the founding and structure of American government, core themes of American political thought, major political institutions, and present-day political and policy issues. Studying the institutions and development of American government, politics and policies will form the basis for 1) understanding the interplay between government and politics; 2) comparisons among democracies; 3) analyses of key concepts in political thought; and 4) a better understanding of current events and policies. This survey course prepares the students for more advanced level courses dealing with American government / politics as well as Public Policy courses.

Course Requirements
Readings: Class lectures and discussions will go beyond a mere delineation of the basics of American politics. The basics will be applied via discussion to reveal their everyday significance. Each week, readings—many of which assume the reader has some background in the study of American politics—have been selected for their ability to give students a factual overview of that week’s theme. These readings (along with in class exercises and supplemental readings) will be used to facilitate class discussion. Subsequently, its important that assigned readings are completed before class. As class will be used to apply the basics of American politics explained in the readings, reading prior to class is essential. Participation in class discussion will be part of the final grade (see below).

Attendance and participation: Regular attendance to lecture/discussion section and contributions to class discussion are essential and will account for 30% (10% for the two section assignments and 5% for attendance and 5% for completion of your presentation assignments—see below for more details) of your grade

☐ Students are allowed two excused absences. Additional unexcused absences will result in deductions from your course mark.
☐ I will lecture for part of the class, but group work and class discussion will also be part
of lecture. Participation, however, will be mandatory part of the discussion sections. Participation will be judged more on quality than quantity. Some of the readings can be quite difficult. Your TA and I will be looking as much at your ability to identify and clearly state difficulties and confusions (your own and those of the author) as well as at your ability to clearly articulate the main points of the text(s), connect the readings to contemporary issues and other theoretical and empirical readings covered throughout the semester.

**Essays:** There will be two paper assignments (approximately 2 pages in length) assigned by your TA, Dave Siracuse. Specifics concerning the written assignment will be communicated to you in your section session.

Presentation: There will be two presentation assignments that you will be asked to deliver in the discussion section. Your TA will provide specifics on the presentation assignments in your discussion section. These presentation assignments will count towards your class participation grade.

**Exams:** Three mandatory in-class exams will determine the major part of your grade. They will assess your knowledge of the subjects covered throughout the semester.

- The course is divided into three themes: The Founding and Political Thought; Institutions of the American Political System; and Issues in American Politics. The first two exams will deal with information from the first two themes of the course. Each exam will be worth 20% (totaling 40%) of your final grade.
- The third exam will test you on the third theme as well as contain a cumulative section. It will account for 30% of your final grade.
- All three exams must be completed in order to receive a grade for the course.

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**Course Schedule**

**THEME I. FOUNDING AND POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**Week 1:** Reconciling American Political Thought with American Political Culture

  **Tuesday, January 24** -
  Introduction
Thursday, January 26 -  
de Tocqueville, Alexis: *Democracy in America* (1839): Chapters 1-5

Tuesday, January 31 -  


Week 2: Founding and Structure of American Government

Thursday, February 2 –  
The Articles of Confederation (1777): [http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/artconf.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/artconf.htm)  
Constitution of the USA (1787):  

Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: *We the People* (2014): Chapter 2 – Founding and the Constitution

Tuesday, February 7 –  
Federalist Papers #10, #51 [http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/federal/fed.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/federal/fed.htm)

(Chapter 7)

Recommended:


Thursday, February 9 – First midterm exam

THEME II. INSTITUTIONS OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Week 3: American Federalism

Tuesday, February 14 –  
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: *We the People* (2014): Chapter 3 – American Federalism
Thursday, February 16 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 3 – American Federalism

Week 4: The Congress

Tuesday, February 21 –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We The People (2014): Chapter 12

Thursday, February 23 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 6 – Congress

Week 5: The Presidency

Tuesday, February 28 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 13 – The Presidency

Thursday, March 2 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 7 – The Presidency

Week 6: Parties and Elections

Tuesday, March 7 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapters 9 – Political Parties and 10 – Campaigns and Elections

Thursday, March 9 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapters 11 – Voting, Campaigns, and Elections and 12 – Political Parties

*****No Class – Tuesday, March 14 and Thursday, March 16 – Spring Break*****

Week 7: Government of Opinion

Tuesday, March 21 –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We The People (2014): Chapters 6 – Civil Liberties
Thursday, March 23 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 5 – Civil Liberties

Week 8: The Media and Public Opinion

Tuesday, March 28 –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We The People (2014): Chapter 7- The Media

Thursday, March 30 –
Ginsberg, Lowi and Weir: We The People (2014): Chapter 6 – Public Opinion

Week 9: The Judiciary

Tuesday, April 4 –
Kernell, Samuel and Steven S. Smith, eds. Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings: Chapter 9 – The Judiciary

Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 15

Thursday, April 6 – Second Midterm

Week 10: The Government’s Role in the American Economy

Tuesday, April 11 – No Class – Passover

Thursday, April 13 – Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 16

THEME III. ISSUES IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Week 11: The Politics of Race and Immigration

Tuesday, April 18 –
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 5 – Civil Rights

Thursday, April 20 –

Week 12: The Politics of Social Welfare

**Tuesday, April 25 –**  

**Thursday, April 27 –**  


Week 13: The Decline of Social Capital?

**Tuesday, May 2 –**  
Ginsberg and Crenson: *Downsizing Democracy* (2004): Chapters 1 and 5

**Thursday, May 4 –**  
Putnam, Robert D.: “The Strange Disappearance of Civic America”  

“The Tocqueville Files” (special section on Putnam’s “Strange Disappearance” from *The American Prospect*)  
Responses by Theda Skocpol, Alejandro Portes, Michael Schudson, Richard Vallely, and Robert Putnam

http://prospect.org/article/unsolved-mysteries-tocqueville-files-1- Skocpol
http://prospect.org/article/unsolved-mysteries-tocqueville-files-ii-1- Portes
http://prospect.org/article/unsolved-mysteries-tocqueville-files-3 - Schudson
http://prospect.org/article/unsolved-mysteries-tocqueville-files - Valley
http://prospect.org/article/unsolved-mysteries-tocqueville-files-0 - Putnam

[recommended: Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: *We the People* (2014): Chapter 8]

Week 14: American Foreign Policy and Democracy
Tuesday, May 9
Ginsberg, Lowi, and Weir: We the People (2014): Chapter 18 – Foreign Policy and Democracy


Final Exam : TBD