

**POS 204y**  
**Current Controversies in American Politics**  
**Spring 2011**

**Professor S. Friedman**

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Milne #221, Wednesdays 5pm-6pm ; also by appointment.

What's the first thing you think of when you think about politics? For many of us, the answer to that question has to do with current and controversial issues—energy, immigration, health care. In this course, we will find “fun” ways to deepen your understanding of some of these controversies through activities including class discussion, class simulation/group activities and the writing of short reaction papers. We will take a look behind the rhetoric and examine the political and policy factors that come into play to produce a more thorough understanding of these controversies. Thus, the first goal of the class is to provide a forum for you to deepen your understanding of some important current issues.

But what does it mean to “deepen your understanding” of issues? As a first step, we will begin by considering broader questions of citizenship and participation in a democracy. Can an individual make a difference? In what ways “should” and do individuals participate and with what consequences? Thus our debate on specific issues will be placed in the broader context of a framework of political participation and citizenship, and the first way we will begin to deepen our understanding of issues will center around the roles citizens can and should play in a democracy. We will compare that role to other theories of how democracies might work.

Additionally, For purposes of this course, we will go deeper in our understanding of particular issues in a number of diverse ways including considering the factors most important to an understanding of the policy process and the history/events that brought us to the current status quo with respect to particular policies. Through simulations and several short papers, you will be asked to go deeper by taking the perspective of and playing the roles of specific players in the policy process and by arguing on behalf of your own views.

In sum, the learning objectives for this class are as follows:

- To Identify key theories and models political scientists have used to understand the role of citizen participation in a democracy.
- To compare theories about the role of citizens to other ideas about how the policy process works.
- To identify the debates, arguments and factors underlying some of the most current and controversial issues faced by modern day Americans.
- To Locate yourself on a continuum: where do you stand on these important current controversies and why?
- To Incorporate other and alternative viewpoints and perspectives into your ideas.

Note: You need not feel particularly well informed with respect to current events or controversies; it is one purpose of the course to augment your level of information.

## Required Readings

**There is no single required text for the class.** ...But of course there is reading! A collection of articles is available on Blackboard including:

- background readings on aspects of citizenship and the policy process
- readings on specific policy issues taken from issues of the CQ Researcher.
- For the most part you can expect at least one reading for each class.

## Course Requirements:

- Two Midterms (2/18, 10%; 4/1, 15%)
- Final (as scheduled by University- 5/11) – 20%.
- Six 1.5-2 page short papers – 20%
- 4 page research paper - 10%
- Attendance/participation/reading quizzes.- 20%.
- Two oral presentations, one to a group and one to the class as a whole. - 5%

\*The short papers will ask you to either react to class material or conduct preparatory research for the debates/simulations. They are intended to be short and get you thinking. The reaction papers will be due the class after we have discussed the issue you want to write about. Except for the longer one, they will be graded “plus,” “check” or “minus.”

Papers should be turned in via e-mail ([friedman@albany.edu](mailto:friedman@albany.edu)) and by hard copy.

## Notes

**Attendance:** This course has a great deal of in class and collaborative work. You have to come to class. Each person is allowed two unexcused absences. Any other absence must be excused by the instructor before the absence or excused afterwards based on a medical note. Failure to do so will be noted and will impact your grade.

**Oral Discourse:** Taking this course fulfills the university’s general education requirement for oral discourse. What this means for our class is that you will be required to make two short presentations to our class: one to a group of your peers (which is easy because we will be engaging in a considerable amount of group work) and one to the entire class (also easy because your groups will be expected to report out to the class as a whole). (See [http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate\\_bulletin/general\\_education.html](http://www.albany.edu/undergraduate_bulletin/general_education.html) For more details of the requirements.)

**Reaction Papers:** The short papers will ask you to either react to class material or conduct preparatory research for the debates/simulations. They are intended to be short and get you thinking. The reaction papers will be due the class after we have discussed the issue you want to write about. Except for the longer one, they will be graded “plus,” “check” or “minus.”

**Papers should be turned in via e-mail ([friedman@albany.edu](mailto:friedman@albany.edu)) and by hard copy.**

Length: 1.5 to 2 pages

No additional reading necessary unless otherwise specified.

cite info or quotes used

Include bibliography even if it's just the text.

**Plagiarism and Academic Honesty:** The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, words, or ideas as if they were your own without giving the original author credit by citing him or her. If you have any questions about plagiarism, please contact me before submitting assignments for grading. Plagiarism violations will result in disciplinary action. Additionally, it goes without saying that students are expected to meet the broader standards of academic honesty expected of students at a major university See link on University policy: <http://www.albany.edu/eas/104/penalty.htm>

**Students with Disabilities:** If you need any class accommodations due to a disability, please utilize University resources as needed, and please let the professor know well in advance of any assignments requiring accommodation(s). It is a function of the University to provide such accommodations as needed.

### **Reading Schedule:**

Reading load will be somewhat heavier the first month of class—schedule subject to change given progress and topic interest. This class will include numerous class simulations and participatory exercises, so we will adjust our schedule accordingly as we go.

## **Part I: Participation and Power Within a Democracy, Overview (1/19-2/7)**

- At least one short paper due prior to exam on 2/18.

1/19-1/21      **Introduction: Do citizens matter? Can Citizens Make a difference?**

1/24-1/26      **Views of Citizenship and Participation**

1. Macedo, Stephan. *Democracy at Risk*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005 ch. 1 **(1/24)**
2. Dalton, Russell J. (2008), *The Good Citizen*, ch. 1 **(1/26)**

1/28            **CQ Researcher: Revising No Child Left Behind**

1/31            **CQ Researcher: Legalizing Marijuana**

2/2-2/4        **Theories of Power and its Three Faces: Pluralism, Elite control/agenda setting and Manipulating Interests**

- G. William Domhoff, *Who Rules America?*, ch.2 **(2/2)**
- John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, ch. 3 **(2/4)**

2/7             **CQ Researcher: Health Care**

## **Part II: Overview of Factors Effecting the Policy Process, (2/9-2/18)**

- 2/9                    **Overview**  
T. R. Dye (2008), *Understanding Public Policy*, chapters 1,2
- 2/11                   **CQ Researcher:** States and Federalism
- 2/14                   **Citizen Opinion:** Reading to Be Announced
- 2/16                   **Review**
- 2/18                   **Test #1**

**Part III- Participation and Power in Action: Policy Debates I      (2/28-3/16)**

\* At least two more reaction papers due by 3/30.

- 2/28-3/2             **Tools and Tactics of Participation:**  
Sen. Bob Graham; *America, The Owner's Manual*. Chapters to be divided up among students.
- 3/4-3/9              **Issues** to be determined by the class; readings to be assigned.
- 3/11-3/14           **Practice simulation:** issues tbd by class; readings assigned.
- 3/16                  **Debate Wrap up** --what has been learned?-- prepare for Part IV simulations

**Part IV: Participation and Power in Action II: Putting it Together as policymakers (simulations)    (3/18-4/15)**

\* Your longer (4-page paper due) either on Congress (3/28) or executive branch/foreign policy (4/15). Note: Regardless of which paper you choose you are responsible for the preparatory work of the class simulation).

\* additional short papers due

- 3/18-3/21           **Election simulation** (issue tbd by class and reading assigned)  
S. Erdman and L. Susskind (1995), *Reinventing Congress for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*,
- 3/23-3/28           **The Role of Congress**  
Simulation: Making better policy (issue tbd by class; readings to be assigned)  
J. W. Kingdon, "Models of Legislative Voting", *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Aug., 1977), pp. 563-595
- 3/30                  **Review**
- 4/1                    **Test #2**

**4/4-4/15**                    ***A Closer Look at Foreign Policy and Foreign Policy Making***

4/4                            **Introduction:** The Role of the Public?  
E. R. Wittkopf (2003), *American Foreign Policy*, chapter 11  
R. H. Davidson and W. J. Oleszek (2010), *Congress and Its Members*,  
chapter 15

4/6-4/13                    **Collecting information:**  
CQ Researcher debates on Global Jihad (on Blackboard), Homeland  
Security, Guantanamo Base Plan and Mexico Drug War

4/15                            **Foreign Policy Wrap up**

**Part IV : From Powerlessness to Power and Increasing Participation:  
Representing Disadvantaged Groups (4/27-5/2)**

4/27                            **Representing the Powerless:** Miroff, Seidelman, Swanstrom, and De  
Luca, *The Democratic Debate: American Politics in an Age of Change*,  
Chpt 10.

CQ Researcher: Women in Sports

4/29                            **CQ Researcher:** Affirmative action

5/2                              **Internet's Role in Participation/ Review and conclusions**  
Readings to be announced.

***Final Exam: Wednesday, May 11. 10:30-12:30***