

Political Science 050
Introduction to American Government
Spring Semester 2020
Clark University

Tuesday and Thursday, 10:25-11:40
Jonas Clark 104
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Description

It is a strange time to be taking an introductory class in American politics! Over the past few years, many of the things political scientists thought we knew about how our government works have been upended. To list just a few of the many things that are unusual right now: we've never had an executive branch with so much turnover; we've never had a congress as consistently polarized as today's congress, we've never had a president who routinely used social media to talk to us, and to attack his opponents, every day, and we've never had a president who has been as consistently unpopular throughout his term in office as Donald Trump has been. To make matters more complicated, there is currently an impeachment trial going on. This is highly unusual; only two American presidents have ever been impeached, so we really don't know how impeachment is supposed to work – and even if we did, it has been clear from the moment the impeachment process began that lessons from the past won't be helpful anyway.

I've chosen to take a different approach to this class than I have in the past. First, I reserve the right to change the syllabus, at very short notice, if something truly unusual should happen. This means we will talk about current events in American politics, we will at times add or subtract readings, and we will make sure to use this moment in American history to reflect on how resilient our political system is (or isn't) and to understand the choices facing Congress, the president, and other political actors. In doing so, it will be important to move past partisanship – to understand why politicians do the things they do, what incentives they have, and how they respond in novel situations.

Second, we will try throughout the semester to focus on what is important. Changes in our media environment have meant that every day we are presented with some fresh outrage in our politics. Some of these moments are quite important -- it is, for instance, important when the president fires the FBI Director or the Attorney General. Others are not – a threatening tweet by the president about an opponent or an unusual choice of clothing by the First Lady may garner headlines, but we tend to forget about such things a few weeks later. And many of the most consequential things to have happened over the past few years tend to get little media attention. The pace of Senate confirmation of judges, or a change in the regulation of airplane safety may be of great importance in the long run yet go largely unnoticed at the time. We will try to use the

concepts we confront in our survey of American politics to make these distinctions, to help us to be intelligent consumers of political news.

Third, we have certainly learned over the past few years to be skeptical of claims that American politics is “exceptional” or that our political problems are unique. The same forces that have been said to lead to Donald Trump’s election can be seen elsewhere – the rise of populism; declining support for political institutions; and the changing norms about what politicians are supposed to look like, or say. Although this is primarily a course on American politics, we will take time to understand how the American system resembles other democratic systems. Moreover, we will look to these other systems for guidance – are there changes we can make to our election laws or to our political institutions that can help us address problems that have emerged in the past decade. At a time when people are, for instance, talking about abolishing the Electoral College, rethinking the rules of congressional apportionment, or considering alternative voting systems, what can we learn from other nations’ political systems?

And fourth, we may have some clues by the end of the semester about who the Democratic nominee for president in 2020 will be – or at least, we will know a bit more about how that election will play out. The 2020 is likely to be shaped by two different long-term changes in American politics: the growing disenchantment of working class voters – particularly, white working class voters in the handful of states that decided the 2016 election – and the increasing prominence of the very wealthy in our politics and our social life. We will take some time at the beginning and the end of the semester to understand these two different types of political actors and to understand how changes in their political activities will impact America in the future.

That’s an ambitious agenda! I hope we can get touch on all of these things while still addressing the basic things one is supposed to learn in an introductory American politics course. I usually teach this course in a pretty straightforward way, and we’ll do some of that too. This course is both an introduction to American national institutions and political processes and an introduction to the discipline of political science. We will survey the basic factors that influence American government, the major institutions of American national government and their relationship to each other, and we will look at the ways in which Americans’ beliefs, attitudes, and preferences are translated into law.

There are no prerequisites for this course, and I will not expect any prior knowledge of American politics. I will, however, expect you to maintain an interest in current political developments. I strongly encourage you to look at the websites of the New York Times and the Washington Post (both of which are free for Clark students) every day and to familiarize yourselves with what is going on in national politics. I will make reference to current political developments throughout the course, and it will be essential to think about these developments as we consider the material in the course. The relatively small size of this course (intro classes in our department tend to have fifty students, but we’ve cut down the size in order to help make discussions better) should give us ample time to discuss our views on all aspects of American politics, and your participation is vital.

The goals of this class, then, are to provide you with a basic understanding of American politics – an understanding that will enable you to step back from whatever partisan or ideological views you bring to it – and to help you to understand how to think about politics from the political scientist's point of view. If, after leaving this class, you choose to pursue further courses in the political science department, you should have a firm grounding for doing so. Even if you do not elect to pursue further courses in political science, however, this class should give you some of the skills to make you a savvy consumer of the political news and political rhetoric with which we are confronted every day.

Readings

The following books are required for the course and are available through the on line bookstore:

- Gest, Justin. 2018. *The White Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kernell, Samuel, and Gary C. Jacobson. 2019. *The Logic of American Politics*, 9th edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
* it is OK to use an older edition of this book if you can find one online.
- Poloni-Staudinger, Lori M., and Michael R. Wolf. 2020. *American Difference: A Guide to American Politics in Comparative Perspective*, 2nd edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Publius. 1787 [1961]. *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter. New York: Mentor Books.
- West, Darrell M. 2014. *Billionaires: Reflections on the Upper Crust*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

All other readings are available on line, or on the course Moodle page.

Requirements and Grading

Attendance and Participation. The most important requirement for this class is your attendance and participation. In order to succeed in this course, you must attend class and you must come prepared to discuss the readings. Attendance will be taken, and attendance and participation will comprise ten percent of your grade.

Exams: There will be a midterm exam and a final exam for this class. Each will be worth twenty percent of your grade. The final will not be cumulative; that is, the midterm will cover our discussions of political behavior and your final will cover our discussions of political institutions. Both the midterm and the final will consist of short essay responses on the material we have read for class.

Written Work:

- a) Reaction Papers: You will complete four reaction papers over the course of the semester. The individual question topics are listed on the syllabus (and are subject to change). For each of these questions, you are expected to draw upon the readings to explore a question

of contemporary significance. Each of these papers should be no more than three pages, double-spaced. Your reaction papers will, collectively, comprise forty percent of your grade, but improvement will count and your later reaction papers may be weighted more heavily in your grade than your early ones. You should come to class on the days when these questions are due prepared to talk about your paper.

- b) **Short Research Essay:** At the conclusion of the class, you will write a five-page paper reviewing empirical research related to one of the topics you have addressed in one of your reaction papers. We will discuss the content of this essay more as the semester progresses. This essay will comprise ten percent of your final grade.

Your reaction papers and research essay should be written in a formal manner. Attached to this syllabus is a style sheet for your papers, which includes both requirements and suggestions. Following the guidelines here will result in a better grade for the course. Also, keep the following in mind when writing your research questions and your short research essay:

- All papers are due in class on the due date.
- You may turn in a paper late for one grade fraction per day (not including weekends) reduction. That is, an A drops to an A- when it is one day late, then to a B+ on the second day, and so on. *However*, failure to submit your papers in class will also factor into your participation grade – if you didn't submit your paper in class, I will assume you were not there.
- Papers with inadequate citation of the readings will be returned to you and will be subject to a one grade fraction per day reduction until I receive them back with proper citation.
- Unless you have authorization from me to do so, you may not email your papers to me. Emailed papers will be returned to you and will be subject to the one grade fraction per day reduction until I receive the printed copy from you.

Summary: Class Requirements and Percent Contribution to Final Grade:

Requirement	Percent Contribution to Grade	Objective
Class attendance and participation	10%	Ability to analyze and apply concepts
Reaction Papers	40% (10% each)	Understanding of material
Research Essay	10%	Ability to analyze and apply concepts
Midterm Exam	20%	Understanding of material
Final Exam	20%	Understanding of material

A Note on Web Resources:

- a) There is a lot of good political information available on the web. I will call your attention to some of this material from time to time. You should feel free to consult web-based resources as you wish. There is also, as you should know, a lot of bad material out there – factually incorrect material, or material that is infused with overly partisan or

ideological views. Thus, if you wish to explore other sources, be an educated consumer. You are free to check with me on the value of any outside material.

- b) You do not, however, *need* to consult outside material for this course (except perhaps for your final essay). In no case will outside material serve as a substitute for the assigned readings.
- c) I will set up a Moodle page for the course. I do not use Moodle to keep track of grades, but I will post the syllabus, any additional readings of interest, and/or lecture notes from time to time.

Office Hours: I highly encourage you to stop by during my office hours at some point during the semester. I'm notoriously bad at connecting names and faces, so it is helpful to me get the extra chance to learn more about how you're doing in the class. You do not need an appointment to visit during my office hours; however, it is always good to let me know if you plan to stop by since I occasionally get pulled away for meetings. You also do not need to have a specific question in mind when you visit – I am happy to talk generally about the course or about politics and political science more generally. If you have a conflict during my office hours I am happy to schedule another time to meet.

Academic Honesty: Finally, as you should be aware by now, the work you do in this course must be entirely your own. To be sure we all have the same understanding of academic integrity as it pertains to this course, here is what the Academic Advising *Blue Book* (p. 22) has to say on the subject:

Academic integrity is highly valued at Clark. Research, scholarship and teaching are possible only in an environment characterized by honesty and mutual trust. Academic integrity requires that your work be your own. Because of the damage that violations of academic integrity do to the intellectual climate of the University, they must be treated with the utmost seriousness and appropriate sanctions must be imposed. The maintenance of high standards of academic integrity is the concern of every member of the University community.

Plagiarism refers to the presentation of someone else's work as one's own, without proper citation of references and sources, whether or not the work has been previously published. Submitting work obtained from a professional term paper writer or company is plagiarism. Claims of ignorance about the rules of attribution, or of unintentional error are not a defense against a finding of plagiarism.

Suspected plagiarism cases will be referred to the Dean's office. If you are in doubt about whether you have provided adequate citation or used others' work properly, please talk with me before handing your paper in!

Like most Clark courses, this class is worth four credit hours. That means that I expect you to commit approximately twelve hours of your time to the class each week, or 180 hours for the full semester. In addition to the three hours of class time per week, you should expect that the reading will take you four to five hours per week, the writing assignments or exam preparation will take an average of one hour per week, and the research projects will take an average of three hours per week. The amount of time you spend on each of these activities will, of course, vary from one week to the next.

Schedule

January 14: Introduction to the Course

January 16: Thinking about American Political Culture

George Washington's Farewell Address (1796). On line,
https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Pt. I, Ch. 3 ("Social State of the Anglo-Americans"); part of Pt. II, Ch. 5 ("The People's Choice and the Instincts of American Democracy in Such Choices").

Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" On line,
<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>

January 21: Thinking about American Political Institutions

Federalist #1-5

The U.S. Constitution (at the end of your copy of Jacobson & Kernell, and at the end of the *Federalist Papers* as well)

I. Disenchanted Voters

January 23: Trump Voters

Kathy Cramer, "For years, I've been watching anti-elite fury build in Wisconsin. Then came Trump." *Vox*, November 16, 2016. On line, <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2016/11/16/13645116/rural-resentment-elites-trump>.

Brad Plumer, "What a Liberal Sociologist Learned from Spending Five Years in Trump's America." *Vox*, October 25, 2016. On line, <https://www.vox.com/2016/9/6/12803636/arlie-hochschild-strangers-land-louisiana-trump>.

January 28 and 30: Working Class Anxiety

Justin Gest, *The White Working Class*

Reaction Paper #1 due at the beginning of class January 30: What do you think the consequences of white working class voters' views will be for our political system in the upcoming decade or so? What should government do to accommodate these views?

II. Political Behavior

February 4 and 6: Public Opinion

Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, ch. 10

Poloni-Staudinger and Wolf, ch. 1, 4

Federalist #49

February 11 and 13: Voting, Campaigns, and Elections

Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, ch. 11

Poloni-Staudinger and Wolf, ch. 10, 11

Federalist #50

February 18 and 20: Political Parties

Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, ch. 12

Poloni-Staudinger and Wolf, ch. 9

Federalist #10

February 25 and 27: Interest Groups

Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, ch. 13

Poloni-Staudinger and Wolf, ch. 8

Reaction Paper #2 due at the beginning of class February 27: Choose one recent political development that relates to the material covered in the past four weeks. What does this development say about the ideas Publius had about how American politics works?

March 3 and 5: No Class (Spring Break)

March 10: The Media

Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, ch. 14

March 12: Midterm Exam

III. Political Institutions

March 17: American Institutions in Comparative Perspective

Poloni-Staudinger and Wolf, ch. 6-7

March 19 and 24: Congress

Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, ch. 6

Federalist #52, 53, 55, 63

March 26 and 31: The Presidency

Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, ch. 7, 8

Federalist #68, 70, 73, 76

Reaction Paper #3 due at the beginning of class March 31: Consider one potential reform or change to American political institutions. What can we learn about the effects of this reform from looking at other countries' political systems?

April 2 and 7: The Courts

Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, ch. 9

Federalist #78

April 9: Putting it all Together: The Separation of Powers and Federalism
Kernell, Jacobson, and Kousser, ch. 3
Federalist #51, 85

Research Essay proposal due at the beginning of class April 9.

IV. Wealth and Inequality in American Politics Today

April 14 and 21: Darrell West, *Billionaires*

Reaction Paper #4 due at the beginning of class April 21: What role should the very wealthy play in our politics? Are there limits that should be put on their political activity?

(No Class April 16)

April 23: Wrap-up

Short Research Essay Due

May x: Final Exam

A Few Tips on Writing
Professor Boatright
Political Science 050

1. Spelling counts. Punctuation counts. Grammar counts. I don't want to spend time in this course on the mechanics of writing, in part because I assume that all of you are good writers. Most of the errors that I notice in students' papers are not made because students do not know how to write well. They are made because students did not proofread their papers carefully. If you take a few minutes to review your paper before turning it in, you will not only catch grammatical errors, but you will also have an opportunity to reconsider the clarity of your argument and the merit of your ideas. Plan your work so that you have time to complete your paper long enough before it is due that you can print it out and set it aside for a few hours, before giving it a final review.
2. The most important part of your paper is the thesis statement. Your thesis statement should appear in the first paragraph or two of your paper. It should succinctly present your original argument and let the reader know what the main point of your paper will be. A thesis statement is not, however, merely an explanation of how the paper is organized.
3. When discussing points in the readings, be sure to cite the book and the page number to which you are referring. For most of the papers in this class, I do not expect you to draw upon material other than the books assigned, so you do not need to supply full bibliographic information. Putting the author and page number in parentheses after the sentence in which you discuss their work is sufficient. For example, you might write
Smith argued that the division of labor encouraged workers to attempt to perform their jobs as quickly and efficiently as possible (Smith, p. 11).
Be sure not to confuse your own ideas with those in the texts; only cite the text where you are referring to a specific point made by the author.
4. *Do not use lengthy quotes.* The papers we will write in this class are too short for you to take up space reciting passages from the books we are reading. Quotes may be appropriate in instances where the author has used a particularly noteworthy or original term. If you were discussing Marx's views on the relations of the Communist Party to the working class, for example, you might write
Marx claimed that the Communists must be aligned with the proletariat because they "have no interests separate and apart from the proletariat as a whole" (Marx, p. 483).
5. Be careful about referring to yourself in your papers. It is sometimes appropriate to write in the first person, but doing so is often a way of being tentative in your writing. You should not qualify your arguments by saying "I think that ..." It should be obvious what you think; the task of an expository essay is to convince the reader that you are right.
6. If you do draw on material not used in class, you should use APSA style of in-text parenthetical citation, with a bibliography at the end -- e.g. (Williams 1989, 15-16); see below for the corresponding bibliography entry) For details on how to do this, see <https://mk0apsaconnectbv6p6.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/43/2018/11/Style-Manual-for-Political-Science-2018.pdf>. This is the format you are likely to use in your other political science courses as well.
7. As you will certainly notice in the coming weeks, there is a distinctive "jargon" in political science. This is not a good thing. I am hopeful that none of you will feel compelled to adopt this jargon as your own. You should be careful, though, when using words that have a very precise meaning in the works we have read and another, less precise meaning outside the discipline. Always be sure that it is clear to the reader whether you are using these words in the discipline-specific context or not. And make sure you know what all the words you use mean!
8. *Do not be afraid to ask for help with your papers.* I have assumed in writing these comments that all of you are familiar with the basic principles of writing style. If you are not satisfied with your writing, ask a friend to look your papers over, ask a college writing tutor for help, or talk to me during office hours or by email. I also highly recommend purchasing the following books on writing style and mechanics:

Strunk, William, and E. B. White. 1979. *The Elements of Style*. Third Edition. New York: Macmillan.
Williams, Joseph. 1989. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. New York: HarperCollins.
Weston, Anthony. 1987. *A Rulebook for Arguments*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.