

Introduction to American Politics

Fall Semester 2020

Thursday September 3rd, 2020-Thursday December 17th, 2020

Instructor: Matt Nelsen, PhD

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Course Description

This course examines the fundamental tenants of American democracy, including the roots of our political institutions, the importance of political participation, and the origins of our individual political preferences. In the process, we will not shy away from difficult conversations about the imperfect nature of American elections, hyperpolarization, and inequities that emerge along the lines of race, gender, class, and sexuality. To do this, we will engage with a variety of texts, podcasts, and documentaries, including those that push us to reflect upon the ways in which American democracy has oftentimes failed to live up to its ideals. Thus, in addition to reading texts that examine classic topics such as congress, the presidency, and national elections, we will also engage with topics such as mass incarceration, policing, and forms of political participation that occur outside of political institutions (e.g. protests, boycotts, and political art).

While the course takes a critical perspective, it is also meant to be an empowering civic learning experience for all those who enroll. You will not be an expert on American politics at the end of this course. However, the course will provide you with some basic knowledge, tools, dispositions for analyzing American politics, and will create opportunities to reflect upon the ways in which individuals can participate in the political process.

Assignments

This course provides the opportunity for informed discussion of ideas pertaining to American politics. In order to be a productive participant in an informed discussion, you need to be prepared for class. If you are not prepared for class, you not only undermine your own learning, you also lower (or at least do not help to elevate) the overall level of the discussion, and thus detract from the learning experience of others. Make sure to budget your time so that you have enough time to engage with the assigned materials before class. You are expected to read the required texts, listen to any relevant podcasts, and watch assigned documentaries before each class meeting. These materials will be uploaded to canvas at least two weeks in advance.

Participation

Informed participation in discussions is required of each student. The *quality* of participation will weigh more heavily than the *quantity* of participation. This course *is* an exercise in democracy, so it is essential to find ways to engage in discourse with individuals who may not share your perspective of ideological predispositions. In the process, I commit to fostering an environment that is inclusive for all voices. However, I am also committed to facilitating conversations that do not rearticulate existing inequalities or violate the norms of pluralist democracy. We will discuss acceptable forms, styles, and levels of participation during the first week of class. Students who are concerned about this requirement of the course, due to shyness or for any other reason, are encouraged to meet with the instructor early in the semester to discuss individual strategies for meeting this course requirement. However, I will provide opportunities for individual reflection at the end of each course that will also contribute to the overall participation grade.

Grading

Assignments must be posted in Canvas and turned in by their assigned deadline or receive a half letter grade penalty for each day it is late. You should expect feedback on your assignments as well as number of points earned within a week after submission. For all assignments, I will use a rubric for grading that you

will receive ahead of time. Following each assignment, I will also provide an overview of grade distributions in order to maintain transparency. I will not accept any assignment for credit after the last day of the quarter.

Graded Assignments

Class Participation (50 points)

Your attendance and quality of participation in each class session will be taken into consideration as part of your final grade (See Participation Rubric). I will also ask you to write short, weekly response papers (1-2 double-spaced pages) that will figure into your participation grade.

Mid-Term Exam (50 points)

An in-class midterm exam will be held midway through the semester. This exam will assess your ability to leverage what you have learned in class to respond to real-life political phenomena such as an opinion article, a social media post, or a political conversation with family or friends. A more detailed description of this assignment and the corresponding rubric will be provided later on in the semester.

Final Exam/Final Paper (100 points)

You will have the option of taking an out-of-class final exam or completing a five-page final paper that assess your ability to leverage the course content to reflect upon a current event, the election, your own political activism, or your own political socialization. You can also choose to write a critical essay that leverages the course materials to consider the political implications of a work of art of your choosing. A more detailed description of this assignment and the corresponding rubric will be provided later on in the semester.

Class Session Schedule, Topics, and Assignment Deadlines

Introduction (One Week)

September 3, 2020: Introductions and Course Overview

The Roots of American Democracy (Two Weeks)

September 10, 2020: American Folklore (The Founding)

Readings

“Declaration of Independence: A Transcription.” 2015. National Archives. November 1, 2015.

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>. (7 pages)

Quinney, John W. 1854. “1854 Fourth of July Speech by Wise Mahican John W. Quinney.” *White Raven Archives Project* (blog). 1854. (8 pages)

Davis, Angela Y. 1983. *Women, Race, & Class*. 1st Vintage Books ed edition. New York: Vintage. (28 pages)

Du Bois, W. E. B. 2014. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Mineola: Dover Publications. (8 pages)

Stanton, Elizabeth. 1882. “‘The Solitude of Self’: Stanton Appeals for Women’s Rights.” 1882.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5315/>. (5 pages)

Multimedia

- NPR. 2019. "Founding Documents: Declaration of Independence." Civics 101: A Podcast. Accessed August 20, 2020. <https://www.civics101podcast.org/civics-101-episodes/declaration>. (28 minutes)
- NPR. 2020. "The Declaration Revisited: Black Americans." Civics 101: A Podcast. Accessed August 25, 2020. <https://www.civics101podcast.org/civics-101-episodes/decarationblackamericans>. (15 minutes)
- NPR. 2020. "The Declaration Revisited: Native Americans." Civics 101: A Podcast. Accessed August 25, 2020. <https://www.civics101podcast.org/civics-101-episodes/declarationnativeamericans>. (15 minutes)
- NPR. 2020. "VIDEO: Frederick Douglass' Descendants Deliver His 'Fourth Of July' Speech." NPR.Org. Accessed August 25, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/03/884832594/video-frederick-douglass-descendants-read-his-fourth-of-july-speech>. (7 minutes)
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September 17, 2020: American Folklore (A Nation of Immigrants)

Readings

- Hunter, Walt. 2018. "The Story Behind the Poem on the Statue of Liberty - The Atlantic." 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/01/the-story-behind-the-poem-on-the-statue-of-liberty/550553/>. (8 pages)
- Lazarus, Emma. 1883. "The New Colossus - Statue Of Liberty National Monument (U.S. National Park Service)." 1883. <https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/colossus.htm>. (1 page)
- Ngai, Mae M. 2014. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America - Updated Edition*. (25 pages)
- Godoy, Maria. 2016. "Lo Mein Loophole: How U.S. Immigration Law Fueled A Chinese Restaurant Boom." NPR.Org. Accessed August 28, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2016/02/22/467113401/lo-mein-loophole-how-u-s-immigration-law-fueled-a-chinese-restaurant-boom>. (7 pages)

Multimedia

- Cluisiau, Christina and Shaul Schwarz. 2020. *Immigration Nation (Episode One: Installing Fear)*. Netflix. (60 Minutes)

OR

- NPR. 2020. "Our Pulitzer-Winning Episode." This American Life. May 13, 2020. <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/704/our-pulitzer-winning-episode>. (53 minutes)

Political Behavior (Five Weeks)

September 25, 2020: Civil Society and Political Engagement

Cohen, Cathy J. 2012. *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*. 1 edition. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press. **(41 Pages)**

Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. **(18 pages)**

Waldner, Lisa K., and Betty A. Dobratz. 2013. "Graffiti as a Form of Contentious Political Participation." *Sociology Compass* 7 (5): 377–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12036>. **(12 pages)**

Multimedia

NPR. 2020a. "Civic Action: Voting, Part 1." Civics 101: A Podcast. 2020. <https://www.civics101podcast.org/civics-101-episodes/votingpt1>. **(24 minutes)**

NPR. 2020b. "Civic Action: Voting, Part 2." Civics 101: A Podcast. 2020. <https://www.civics101podcast.org/civics-101-episodes/votept2>. **(20 minutes)**

October 1, 2020: Public Opinion and Media

Cohn, Nate, and Kevin Quealy. 2020. "How Public Opinion Has Moved on Black Lives Matter." *The New York Times*, June 10, 2020, sec. The Upshot. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/10/upshot/black-lives-matter-attitudes.html>. **(6 pages)**

DeSante, Christopher D., and Candis Watts Smith. 2020. "Less Is More: A Cross-Generational Analysis of the Nature and Role of Racial Attitudes in the Twenty-First Century." *The Journal of Politics* 82 (3): 967–80. <https://doi.org/10.1086/707490>. **(13 pages)**

Herndon, Astead W. 2020. "Are Racial Attitudes Really Changing? Some Black Activists Are Skeptical." *The New York Times*, August 11, 2020, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/11/us/politics/black-lives-matter-chicago-roseland.html>. **(6 pages)**

Tesler, Michael. 2020. "Analysis | The Floyd Protests Will Likely Change Public Attitudes about Race and Policing. Here's Why." *Washington Post*. Accessed August 12, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/06/05/floyd-protests-will-likely-change-public-attitudes-about-race-policing-heres-why/>. **(3 pages)**

Bonilla, Tabitha, and Alvin B. Tillery. 2020. "Which Identity Frames Boost Support for and Mobilization in the #BlackLivesMatter Movement? An Experimental Test." *American Political Science Review*, July, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000544>. **(13 pages)**

Multimedia

Amer, Karim and Jehane Noujaim. 2019. *The Great Hack*. Netflix. **(110 Minutes)**

October 8, 2020: Social Movements and Interest Groups

Lacombe, Matthew J. 2019. "The Political Weaponization of Gun Owners: The National Rifle Association's Cultivation, Dissemination, and Use of a Group Social Identity." *The Journal of Politics* 81 (4): 1342–56. <https://doi.org/10.1086/704329>. (14 pages)

Nelsen, Matthew. 2020. "Analysis | America's Classrooms Shut down This Spring. Civics Lessons Shifted to the Streets." *Washington Post*. Accessed August 12, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/06/22/americas-classrooms-shut-down-this-spring-civics-lessons-shifted-streets/>. (2 pages)

Schickler, Eric. 2018. "Debunking the Myth That 'Identity Politics' Is Bad for the Democratic Party." Vox. April 16, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/4/16/17242748/identity-politics-racial-justice-democratic-party-lilla-traub-trump>. (7 pages)

Ransby, Barbara. 2018. *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century*. First edition. Oakland, California: University of California Press. (33 pages)

OR

Zepeda-Millán, Chris. 2017. *Latino Mass Mobilization: Immigration, Racialization, And Activism*. Cambridge, United Kingdom New York Melbourne: Cambridge University Press. (24 pages)

Multimedia

Folayan, Sabaah. 2017. *Whose Streets?* Magnolia Pictures. (103 minutes)

October 15, 2020: Parties and Elections (National)

Farhi, Paul. 2012. "Do Campaigns Really Change Voters' Minds?" *Washington Post*, July 6, 2012, sec. Opinions. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/do-campaigns-really-change-voters-minds/2012/07/06/gJQAEIjyRW_story.html. (3 pages)

Azari, Julia. 2016. "Weak Parties and Strong Partisanship Are a Bad Combination." Vox. November 3, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/mischiefs-of-faction/2016/11/3/13512362/weak-parties-strong-partisanship-bad-combination>. (4 pages)

Taub, Amanda. 2016. "The Rise of American Authoritarianism." Vox. March 1, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>. (34 pages)

Hamilton, Alexander. 1788. "Number 68: The View of the Constitution of the President Continued in Relation to the Mode of Appointment." In *The Federalist Paper*, 392–96. New York: Penguin. (4 pages)

Valentino, Nicholas A., and David O. Sears. 2005. "Old Times There Are Not Forgotten: Race and Partisan Realignment in the Contemporary South." *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (3): 672–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00136.x>. (17 pages)

Multimedia

Lears, Rachel. 2019. *Knock Down the House*. Netflix. (86 minutes)

October 22, 2020: Parties and Elections (Local—Chicago)

Cohen et al. 2019. *Race and Place: Young Adults and the Future of Chicago* (Students select two sections of their choice).

Multimedia

October 29, 2020: Midterm Exam

Election Recap (One Week)

November 5, 2020: Assessing Urban-Rural Divides (2016 vs. 2020)

Cramer, Katherine. 2012. "Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective." *The American Political Science Review* 106 (3): 517–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/23275431>. (16 pages)

Kurtzleben, Rachel. "Rural Voters Played A Big Part In Helping Trump Defeat Clinton." 2020. NPR.Org. Accessed August 12, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/14/501737150/rural-voters-played-a-big-part-in-helping-trump-defeat-clinton>. (6 pages)

Waldman, Paul. 2020. "Opinion | Trump's Strategy to Win the Suburbs with Racial Division Has a Big Flaw." *Washington Post*, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/21/trumps-strategy-win-suburbs-with-racial-division-has-big-flaw/>. (2 pages)

Multimedia

Babaro, David. 2020. "Trump's Suburban Strategy." *The New York Times*, 2020, sec. Podcasts. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/podcasts/the-daily/republican-convention-suburbs.html>. (33 minutes)

Watch or listen to at least 30 minutes of election night coverage

Political Institutions (Five Weeks)

November 12, 2020: Congress

Fenno, Richard. 2002. *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. Longman Classics edition. New York: Pearson. **(8 pages)**

Mayhew, David R. 2004. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Second edition. New Haven: Yale University Press. **(8 pages)**

Minta, Michael D., and Valeria Sinclair-Chapman. 2013. "Diversity in Political Institutions and Congressional Responsiveness to Minority Interests." *Political Research Quarterly* 66 (1): 127–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912911431245>. **(13 pages)**

Multimedia

NPR. 2018. "Starter Kit: Legislative Branch." Civics 101: A Podcast. 2018. <https://www.civics101podcast.org/civics-101-episodes/legislativebranch>. **(24 minutes)**

NPR. 2018. "Midterm Edition: House v Senate." Civics 101: A Podcast. Accessed September 25, 2020. <https://www.civics101podcast.org/civics-101-episodes/housevsenate>. **(25 minutes)**

November 19, 2020: The Presidency

Readings

Galvin, Daniel J. 2009. *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press. **(21 pages)**

Kernell, Samuel H. 2006. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. 1 edition. Washington, D.C: CQ Press. **(19 pages)**

Multimedia

"Presidential: A Podcast about the Character and Legacy of America's Presidents." 2016. Washington Post. Accessed August 12, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/business/podcasts/presidential/>. **(Listen to two episodes/presidents of your choice)**

November 26, 2020: THANKSGIVING—NO CLASS

December 3, 2020: The Courts

Readings

TBD based on student interest

Multimedia

Koenig, Sarah. 2018. "Serial: Season Three." (**Episode 1: A Bar Fight Walks Into the Justice Center**). Serial. Accessed August 28, 2020. <https://serialpodcast.org/>. **(50 minutes)**

OR

Cohen, Julia and Betsy West. 2018. *RBG*. Magnolia Pictures. **(99 minutes)**

December 10, 2020: The Carceral State

Alexander, Michelle. 2020. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. 10th Anniversary ed. edition. The New Press. **(19 pages)**

Burch, Traci. 2013. *Trading Democracy for Justice: Criminal Convictions and the Decline of Neighborhood Political Participation*. Illustrated edition. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press. **(29 pages)**

Soss, Joe, and Vesla Weaver. 2017. "Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (1): 565–91. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-060415-093825>.

Multimedia

DuVernay, Ava. 2016. *13th*. Netflix. **(90 Minutes)**

December 17, 2020: Final Reflections and the Next Chapter of American Democracy

Cohen, Cathy J. 1997. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (4): 437–65. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-3-4-437>. **(8 pages)**

Other selections TBD based on student interest
