

Politics in the United States

Fall Semester 2021

Thursday September 2nd, 2021-Thursday December 16th, 2021

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 2, 2021: Introductions and Course Overview

The Roots of American Democracy (Three Weeks)

September 9, 2021: 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, 2021. <https://www.civics101podcast.org/civics-101-episodes/declaration>. (28 minutes)
- NPR. 2020. "The Declaration Revisited: Black Americans." Civics 101: A Podcast. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.civics101podcast.org/civics-101-episodes/declarationblackamericans>. (15 minutes)
- NPR. 2020. "The Declaration Revisited: Native Americans." Civics 101: A Podcast. Accessed August 25, 2021. <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 16, 2021: 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. "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)
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September 23, 2021: The Political Stakes of American Folklore

- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2019. "America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One." *The New York Times*, August 14, 2019, sec. Magazine. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american->

[democracy.html](#), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>. (20 pages)

Nelsen, Matthew D. 2021. "Cultivating Youth Engagement: Race & the Behavioral Effects of Critical Pedagogy." *Political Behavior*: 43 (751-784). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09573-6>. (30 pages)

Jefferson, Hakeem. 2021. "Storming The U.S. Capitol Was About Maintaining White Power In America." *FiveThirtyEight* (blog). January 8, 2021. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/storming-the-u-s-capitol-was-about-maintaining-white-power-in-america/>. (6 pages)

Nelsen, Matthew. 2021. "Analysis | Serious Historians Are Criticizing Trump's 1776 Report. It's How Most U.S. History Is Already Taught." *Washington Post*, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/28/trumps-1776-report-is-getting-lot-criticism-its-how-most-us-history-is-already-being-taught/>. (3 pages)

Tillery, Alvin B. 2021. "Analysis | Would the Founding Fathers Support Critical Race Theory?" *Washington Post*. Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/06/30/would-founding-fathers-support-critical-race-theory/>. (3 pages)

Multimedia

Klein, Ezra, Nikole Hannah-Jones, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. 2021. "The Ezra Klein Show: Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates on the Fight Over U.S. History on Apple Podcasts." Apple Podcasts. Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/nikole-hannah-jones-and-ta-nehisi-coates-on-the/id1548604447?i=1000530493907>. (77 minutes)

Political Behavior (Five Weeks)

September 30, 2021: 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 7, 2021: Interest Groups, Social Movements, and Public Opinion

- Lacombe, Matthew J. 2018. "Analysis | This Is How the NRA 'politically Weaponized' Its Membership." Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/10/11/this-is-how-the-nra-politically-weaponized-its-membership/>. (3 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)
- 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)
- 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)

Additional articles regarding climate change and environmental movements will be added.

Multimedia

- Folayan, Sabaah. 2017. *Whose Streets?* Magnolia Pictures. (103 minutes)
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October 14, 2021: Political Parties and Elections

- 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)
- Brown, Nadia. 2021. "Analysis | Stacey Abrams's Success in Georgia Builds on Generations of Black Women's Organizing." *Washington Post*. Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/10/stacey-abramss-success-georgia-builds-generations-black-womens-organizing/>. (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)

Multimedia

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

October 21, 2021: Midterm Exam

No class. Exam will be uploaded before class. You will have until the end of class time (8:00pm) to submit your exam via Canvas.

Political Geography (Two Weeks)

October 28, 2021: Chicago Politics

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

Nuamah, Sally A., and Thomas Ogorzalek. 2021. "Close to Home: Place-Based Mobilization in Racialized Contexts." *American Political Science Review* 115 (3): 757–74.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000307>. **(16 pages)**

Enos, Ryan D. 2016. "What the Demolition of Public Housing Teaches Us about the Impact of Racial Threat on Political Behavior." *American Journal of Political Science* 60 (1): 123–42.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12156>. **(17 pages)**

Multimedia

Selections TBD based on Student Interest

November 4, 2021: Assessing Urban-Rural Divides

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)**

Nelsen, Matthew D. and Chris Petsko. 2021. "Race and White Rural Consciousness." *Perspectives on Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001948> **(12 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

Rubin, Sally and Ashley York. 2018. *Hillbilly*. Hulu. (86 minutes).

Political Institutions (Five Weeks)

November 11, 2020: The Filibuster and Budget Reconciliation (Congress)

CNN, Paul LeBlanc. 2021. "Here's What a 'vote-a-Rama' Is (and What It Means for Democrats' \$3.5 Trillion Budget Resolution)." CNN. Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/10/politics/vote-a-rama-explainer-budget-reconciliation/index.html>. (4 Pages)

Sawicky, Max B. 2021. "The Infrastructure and Budget Bills Are a Watershed in U.S. Economic Doctrine." In These Times. Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://inthesetimes.com/article/infrastructure-reconciliation-senate-bernie-sanders-biden-deficit-climate-filibuster>. (6 pages)

Stevenson, Peter W. 2021. "Analysis | The Filibuster, Explained." Washington Post. April 9, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/09/what-is-filibuster/>. (5 pages)

Other selections TBD based on student interest

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 18, 2021: Presidential Party Building and Presidential Time (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)

Galvin, Daniel J. and Josh Vincent. 2021. "Joe Biden Might Invest in Building the Democratic Party. Here's Why That Matters. - The Washington Post." Accessed August 30, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/21/democratic-presidents-have-traditionally-hurt-their-parties-joe-biden-may-be-different/>. (3 pages)

Goldberg, Michelle. 2021. "Opinion | The First Post-Reagan Presidency." *The New York Times*, January 29, 2021, sec. Opinion. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/28/opinion/biden-president-progressive.html>. (4 pages)

Kreitner, Richard. 2020. "What History Tells Us About Trump's Implosion and Biden's Opportunity," October 12, 2020. <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/interview-stephen-skowronek/>. (18 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 25, 2021: Thanksgiving

No class. Enjoy the holiday!

December 2, 2021: The Carceral State (The Courts)

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. **(12 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>. **(20 pages)**

Multimedia

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

December 9, 2021: Critique Week

No class.

December 16, 2021: 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
