

PSC 120: The American Political System DePaul University, Fall 2016

Professor: Ben Epstein
Class Tues. & Thurs. 11:20am – 12:50pm
Room: O'Connell 330
Office Hours: Tues. 4:30-5:30, Wed 3-4:30 & by appt.
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Email: bepstein@depaul.edu
Course Website:
<http://americanpoliticalsystem.wordpress.com/>
Course Blog: <http://psc120fall2016.blogspot.com/>

Welcome to The American Political System. Together we will explore the historical and theoretical foundations of the American political system, its major political institutions (Congress, the Presidency, the Bureaucracy, and the Supreme Court), and various other topics affecting political life and political behavior in America including political parties, interest groups, elections and the media. During each phase of this course we will focus on both a historical perspective as well as a clear connection to the modern state of American politics. Of particular interest for us this quarter will obviously be the 2016 Presidential and Congressional elections, the particular challenges facing the country, and the role of citizens in the political process at all levels. We will develop skills to analyze this important era in American politics from many different angles. Themes weaving themselves throughout the course include the nature and distribution of power in American society as well as the rights, responsibilities, and roles of American citizens within the American political system. Many of our readings as well as important announcements and course related links will be available on our class website, class blog, and through e-mails during the quarter.

REQUIRED TEXT:

1. Benjamin Ginsberg, Theodore Lowi, Margaret Weir, and Caroline Tolbert: *We the People: An Introduction to American Politics – Tenth Essentials Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015). (ISBN-13: 978-0-393-93705-3)
OR the *Ninth Essentials Edition* (2013). (ISBN-13: 978-0-393-92110-6)
2. Handouts and scanned documents (available through class website or occasionally handed out or e-mailed to class)

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of this quarter all students should be able to:

1. Explain the structure of the American political system along with its limitations and varied processes.
2. Connect the historical evolution of American political thought and behavior to contemporary debates and issues.
3. Compare and contrast diverse viewpoints on sociopolitical issues to develop an understanding of key political concepts.
4. Articulate a strong informed opinion on important political topics.
5. Take active roles in supporting the social and/or political causes that they endorse.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS

1. **Attendance and Participation:** Arrive on time to class and turn off all cell phones, etc. and be ready to actively discuss the readings and topics for the class. Quality participation includes thorough note taking, active listening, and asking thoughtful questions.
2. **Academic Integrity:** Avoid Plagiarism – representing another's work as your own. Plagiarism is a very serious offense and will result in a grade of 0 for the assignment and possibly an F for the course. For more on plagiarism, and how to avoid it see the plagiarism tutorial at <http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/plag/plagiarismtutorial.php>
3. **Internet:** All students need to check the course website regularly. This is where you will find scanned documents, important links, your course syllabus, and announcements for the course.

The course website is not the D2L site, instead it can be found at: <http://americanpoliticalsystem.wordpress.com/>. We will be communicating via e-mail at times throughout the course so make sure you are checking e-mail regularly.

- 4. Reading:** You should complete the assigned reading before the topic is discussed in class. Our course will move quickly and our class time will often use the readings as a point of departure. The reading load averages around 50-60 pages per week. However, the week readings are not evenly distributed. Please plan ahead and take advantage of lighter reading weeks by reading ahead on upcoming topics.

GRADING

Your grade will be based on the following factors:

- 1. Class Attendance, Participation, and Office Visit - 15%:** Class participation is based on active engagement during class including discussions, note taking, and thoughtful questioning. In addition, each student must visit me during office hours at some point between week 2 and week 8 (the week ending 11/3) - 5% of grade. This will help me get to know more about you and to find out how to best direct the course. Walk-in office meetings are always welcome but it's best to set up appointments via e-mail, bluestar, or in person. More than two times coming to class late or being absent are grounds for the lowering of the final grade. Documentation for excused absence should be submitted to the Dean of Students office.
- 2. Political Blog - 10%:** Each week I will post an article, video clip, or discussion topic on the course blog for the upcoming week. You are expected to read the blog each week and add your personal comments, thoughts, and critical analysis. Each entry should be no longer than ½ page (one long or two short paragraphs) and does not need to include outside research. Though these are not long entries they should be well thought out. NOTE: Each student is only expected to write 8 blog entries throughout the quarter but you must read the blog each week. Each entry must be made by 8 pm on Wednesday so that each student will be able to read all of the responses. You can earn extra credit for up to two additional thoughtful blog comments. All students should read the blog sometime between Wednesday night and class on Thursday. Keep in mind that your responses will be read by all of your classmates so proofread carefully. The blog can be found at: <http://psc120spring2016.blogspot.com/>
- 3. Political News Presentation 10%:** On the first week of class each student will choose one class in which they will present an important current news story related to American politics. You should select a news story or event that is current (occurring within the last week) and is personally interesting. For your presentation you are expected to: 1) summarize your news story, 2) explain why it is important in the context of U.S. politics, and 3) lead the class in a brief discussion of your new story by asking probing questions and framing the event within our course content when appropriate. Feel free to bring in any visuals that might aid in your presentation, though these are not required. Each presentation will last approximately 6-7 minutes including the short class discussion that each of you will lead.
- 4. Analytical Paper - 15%:** You will be required to write a short paper during the second half of the course. This paper will evaluate some aspect related to major themes from the course or current policy debates. Details will be provided later in the quarter.
- 5. Mid Term Exam - 25%:** Multiple choice, identifications, and essay question(s). All readings and class material is fair game. Review materials will be provided.
- 6. Final Exam - 25%:** Multiple choice, identifications, and essay question(s). Only the essay(s) will be cumulative. Again, all readings and class materials are fair game.

GRADING SCALE

A	93 - 100	A-	90 - 92	B+	87 - 89	B	83 - 86
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B-	80 – 82	C	73 – 76	D+	67 – 69	D-	60 – 62
C+	77 – 79	C-	70 – 72	D	63 – 66	F	Below 60

STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Students who feel they may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me privately to discuss their specific needs. All discussions will remain confidential. To ensure that you receive the most appropriate reasonable accommodation based on your needs, contact me as early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first week of class), and make sure that you have contacted the:

- PLuS Program (for LD, AD/HD) at 773-325-1677, Student Center #370, and/or
- The Office for Students with Disabilities (for all other disabilities) at 773-325-1677, Student Center #370

SOME GRADING TIPS

1. Start strong because working hard in the beginning of the quarter reduces the stresses and workload at the end.
2. Feel free to stop by my office hours if you have any questions or concerns (besides, its required so why not?)
3. Extra Credit - Throughout the quarter if talks, or other related events, come up that pertain to our class material, it is possible that I will notify the class and allow for extra credit assignments that will be counted toward points on the midterm or final exam. Also, you can earn credit for up to two bonus blog posts.
4. You are encouraged to make use of the writing center to work on your writing. They are located at 802 W. Belden, 250 McGaw Hall. The Writing Center is open Mon. – Thurs. 10 AM to 5 PM. Fri. 10 AM to 3 PM. Phone: (773) 325-4272

COURSE OUTLINE, SCHEDULE, READING ASSIGNMENTS, AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

(Guiding questions are simply tools to help you get the most out of your reading, not written assignments. All dates and assignments subject to change)

9/8 Introduction

Part I: Historical and Theoretical Foundations

9/13 American Political Culture
We The People: Ch. 1, pgs. 3 – 22

Guiding Questions: Why do you think American's trust in government has declined since the 1960s? Does American democracy require high levels of political knowledge from American citizens? What type of democracy exists in America and how does it compare to other forms of government? What suggests that liberty, equality, and democracy are core American political ideals? Has the American system upheld these political values? Are there others that you would add to this list?

9/15 The Founding and the Constitution
We the People: Appendix, pgs. A1 – A4 (Declaration of Independence)
We The People: Ch. 2, pgs. 29 – 56
We the People: Appendix, pgs. A38 – A41 (Federalist #51 by James Madison)
Federalist # 23 by Alexander Hamilton: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/federal/fed23.htm>

Guiding Questions: What were the central problems the Founding Fathers faced at the Constitutional Convention and how did they resolve them? What are some unresolved

Constitutional issues? Does the separation of powers cause more problems in our political system today (from gridlock etc.) than the benefits it provides? Why do you think our Constitution has survived for well over 200 years while most others have not?

9/20 Federalism

We the People: Ch. 3, pgs. 63 – 86

Guiding Questions: What powers belong to the states, what belong to the federal government, and what powers are shared? What is the proper balance between state and federal government powers and authority? When should the federal government have the power to coerce states to adopt national policies against their will (if ever)? What are the unique challenges facing the states in the current financial crisis and how should they be handled?

Part II: Political Behavior

9/22 Political Participation

Course Website : We the People: Shorter 8th edition: Ch. 8. Pgs. 269 – 302

Guiding Questions: What are various forms of electoral and nonelectoral political participation? How would you describe the reasons for the discrepancy in voting patterns between various, racial, religious, educational, class, and age groups? Do you think these patterns will change as a moving forward? What can be done to increase political participation of young adults? What are the most influential forms of political mobilization?

9/27 Campaigns, Elections, and Representation

We the People: Ch. 7, pgs. 199 – 236

Guiding Questions: How do voters decide who to vote for? Do elections “send a message” or can we really tell much about what voters want from the outcome of elections? If you answered yes, what do you think voters want in 2014? Are Americans fairly represented in the American political system? Why or why not? What are the major differences between the Democratic and Republican Parties? What have caused party realignments? What is the likelihood of having future realignments? Would our system benefit from stronger third parties? Why or why not? Why do third parties have a tough time surviving in our country?

9/29 Political Parties

Course Website: “What Culture Wars? Debunking the Myth of a Polarized America,” by Morris P. Fiorina (from The Enduring Debate), pgs. 415 – 419.

Course Website: “How Divided Are We,” by James Q. Wilson (from The Enduring Debate), pgs. 443 - 454.

Guiding Questions: Are we a “polarized” nation of red and blue? What did the 2012 election suggest about the notion of a red and blue America? Are we more or less polarized leading into the 2014 election? How do our economic and social ideologies affect our political leanings?

10/4 Interest Groups

We the People: Appendix, pgs. A33 – A37 (Federalist #10)

We the People: Ch. 8, pgs. 243 – 264

Course Website: “The Logic of Collective Action,” by Mancur Olson (from The Enduring Debate), pgs. 424 – 433.

Guiding Questions: Do interest groups do more to protect the rights of minorities or simply reflect the collective interests of the nation? What can be done to create a more equal balance of interest groups representing interests across the nation? What changes in interest groups would

you predict resulting from recent technological or social phenomena (social networking etc.)? Do you agree with the free-rider problem described by Mancur Olson and its implications for interest groups? Why or why not?

10/6 Social Movements/Midterm Review Session

Course Website: *The Struggle for Democracy* by Edward Greenberg and Benjamin Page, Chapter 8 – Social Movements, pgs. 220 – 240.

Guiding Questions: What do social movements offer that interest groups do not? Why might social movements be more limited than interest groups? What strategies are used during social movements? What role has the media played in the success or failure of some social movements? What helps social movements succeed in general? Are social movements more helpful or harmful to the democratic process?

10/11 MID-TERM EXAM

10/13 Public Opinion

We the People: Ch. 5, pgs. 141 – 166

Guiding Questions: To what extent should political leaders listen to public opinion? What is the impact of public opinion polls on democracy? What role should public opinion play in the formation of policies? How can polls be misused by the state, politicians, or media? How has American public opinion shifted since the 1960s? How does the media impact governing? How has the role of media changed over the past 20 years? How should their role in politics be changed, if at all?

10/18 Media

We the People: Ch. 6, pgs. 173 – 193

Guiding Questions: What are the three types of media used by Americans to get their news? How do they compare to each other in terms of content and accessibility? What are the main reasons for and results of the nationalization of news reporting? Who shapes the news? How? How can the media be used to for framing, agenda setting, and priming? What types of media do young Americans most regularly use? How might this change political communication moving forward? How is media regulated?

Part III: The American Political Institutions

10/20 The Presidency

Article II of the U.S. Constitution, Interactive Constitution (National Constitution Center):
www.constitutioncenter.org/constitution

(This is a great site, take some time to click on sections of the original text for more info)

We the People: Ch. 10, pgs. 311 – 335

Guiding Questions: Has the president become too powerful? What would the founding fathers say about the current state of the presidency? Do you believe that Obama won a “mandate” in 2008 and if so what must he do to fulfill that mandate? How much of a president’s difficulties are his own doing and how much are systemic? How will the efforts to make the presidency more transparent affect the position (i.e. credibility, power, authority, diplomacy, etc.).

10/25 The Presidency continued/The Bureaucracy

We the People: Ch. 11, pgs. 341 – 363

Guiding Questions: To what extent is the federal bureaucracy a part of the executive branch and to what extent is it a separate “fourth branch” of government? How does the bureaucracy affect our everyday lives? Have civil service exams and career bureaucrats helped or hurt the system? Why is it difficult to reduce the size and inefficiency of the bureaucracy?

10/27 Congress

Article I of the U.S. Constitution, Interactive Constitution (National Constitution Center):

www.constitutioncenter.org/constitution

We the People: Ch. 9, pgs. 271 – 293

Guiding Questions: Do you think that term limits for members of Congress are a good idea? Is Congress the most powerful branch as most of the Framers predicted it would be? How is Congress organized? Who are the most influential people affecting congressional actions that are not elected?

11/1 Congress continued (Today is last day to earn full credit for your required office visit)

We the People: Ch. 9, pgs. 293 – 304

Course Website: “Congress: The Electoral Connection,” by David R. Mayhew (from The Enduring Debate), pgs. 141 – 145.

11/3 The Courts

Article III of the U.S. Constitution, Interactive Constitution (National Constitution Center):

www.constitutioncenter.org/constitution

Federalist #78 by Alexander Hamilton: <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa78.htm>

We the People: Ch. 12, pgs. 369 – 394

Guiding Questions: Are the federal courts the “least dangerous branch?” What is the proper role of the Supreme Court in the American political process? Has this role changed over time? Should this role change? How are the federal courts organized? What is the meaning of “judicial restraint” and “judicial activism?” Should justices apply strict constructionist when dealing with Constitutional interpretation? How has judicial review shifted the balance of power among the branches of government, if at all?

Part IV: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights in America

11/8 Civil Liberties (Paper Due – Date Subject to Change)

We the People: Ch. 4, pgs. 93 – 117

Bill of Rights (Amendment 1 – 10), Interactive Constitution (National Constitution Center):

www.constitutioncenter.org/constitution

Guiding Questions: Should the Bill of Rights apply to the states as well as the federal government? Why? Do you think the justice system favors the rights of criminals over the public good? What are the dangers in going too far in restricting the rights of criminals? Do you support the practice of phone wiretapping in order to search for potential terrorist activity? How do civil liberties change during times of war (or do they)? What actions should be taken against those currently being held at Guantanamo Bay for their suspected involvement in terrorism?

11/10 Election Debrief/Civil Rights

We the People: Ch. 4, pgs. 118 – 134

Guiding Questions: What is the best means of achieving an integrated society? Describe the progress made in the area of civil rights in the past 40 years? What is the difference between

equality of opportunities and equality of outcomes? What remains to be done? How does the election of an African American president affect the debate about civil rights in this nation? Is affirmative action "reverse racism?"

11/15 Final Class/Civil Rights (continued)/Final Exam Review

11/22 FINAL EXAM (11:30am - 1:45pm)