

Revised – August 29, 2023

POLI 325 – UNITED STATES POLITICS I
Fall 2023
MW 4:05-5:25 p.m.

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Office hours: Tuesday, 2-4 pm.

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In this class, we'll examine the institutions, interests, and rich cultural history that underpin American democracy. While you've no doubt heard about controversial issues in America, this course will give you a roadmap as to how these issues developed, and why. We will not only examine the institutional origins of these issues, but *why* these institutions were set up that way to begin with – drawing a causal line from history to the present day.

The picture that emerges is that the United States has always been a work-in-progress; a set of institutions meant to make a wide variety of interests get along. Those institutions brought bright spots to world history: democracy, liberty, and justice; the notion that all people are created equal; the promise of an “American dream.” Yet they also brought us a dark side: the enduring legacy of racism; the scars of imperialism; and a notoriously dysfunctional social safety net.

How did America wind up as a land of contradictions? Do its institutions advance the cause of equality, or hinder it? How flexible are those institutions? These are the questions that we will grapple with over the course of the semester.

Aims and Scope

This course is designed to familiarize you with American institutions, and to develop the potential for applied knowledge. You will learn not only how American institutions work, but also why they came to work that way, and how they have changed over time. As we will see, many of the “hot-button” issues we hear about in America today stem from long-running conflicts about the size, power, and purpose of these institutions.

There is a required textbook for this course. This textbook focuses on an institutional perspective of American Politics. We will discuss in class what, exactly, an institution is, but think of it like the building blocks of government. The textbook will give you an outline of, effectively, how American governance is *shaped*.

That being said, the shapes don't tell the whole story. Why is America a two-party system? Because it was designed to be that way mathematically! The question of why these institutions exist extends beyond the reaches of the textbook and into the annals of history. To

illustrate the formative years of American law and governance, we will also utilize a companion reader chock full of Supreme Court cases and other important anecdotes.

In addition to the textbook and reader, I will occasionally swap out material for other topics I think are particularly important. Since this is an advanced level course, we have some room to play around with arcane social science queries.

Meetings & Conference Sections

This class will meet twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays at 4:05 p.m. Our last class will meet on December 4th, followed by a remote final exam at a to-be-determined date. Starting September 18, you will also have a weekly conference section in which you will discuss the readings; these sections will roughly correspond to the course outline blocs included below. These conferences will constitute your participation grade, so make sure to attend! In addition, there will be occasional opportunities to participate in the main lecture. I will discuss conference sections in the lecture as we get closer to the start date.

If you are uncomfortable with public speaking, participation may also be fulfilled through alternative means including but not limited to office hours meetings or handing in written notes during conference sections. If you expect this to be a concern, please consult me early in the semester.

Grading Criteria

- Midterm – 25% (Administered October 16th to October 20th; remote)
- Final exam – 30% (To be scheduled during exam period; remote)
- Participation – 10%
- Writing assignments – 35% (Due Wed., September 27th and Fri., November 24th)

You will have two short writing assignments, one due in September and the other due in November. In these assignments, you will be given a prompt. Responses should fall somewhere between 500 and 1000 words. Grading criteria are flexible, but you should seek to demonstrate comprehension of the course material, original analysis, and competent writing skills. There will be a writing guide posted on the MyCourses page, but this is not meant as a strict rubric.

Required Reading

You are required to purchase the following items from the Bookstore:

- Kollman, Ken. 2018. *The American Political System, Third Edition*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Kollman, Ken. 2019. *Readings in American Politics: Analysis and Perspectives, Fifth Edition*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.

Although this textbook is ever-so-slightly out-of-date, I like this one because it has a companion reader that highlights important Supreme Court cases and other related literature. We will diverge from the textbook a few times, but overall, I like the way it gives an overview of American institutions.

Class Outline

Weeks 1-4: Historical and Philosophical Foundations of American Government

In this section, we will explore the question of how early enlightenment thinkers influence the Founding Fathers, and what the founders' vision of America actually *was*. From there, we'll go over the basic structure of American law and government, as outlined in the Constitution.

Weeks 5-7: Social, Economic, and Racial Cleavages in Early America

Due to frequent missing classes these weeks, we'll take a detour from the textbook material and examine, specifically, how these institutions both reflected and impacted social cleavages in America's formative years. In order to keep everyone sharp, we will have some assignments during this period.

Weeks 8-11: Institutions

The real meat of the course, in this section we'll do a deep dive on everyone's favorite three-branch system of government. Here, you'll learn about how Congress, the President, and the Courts actually *work* – but we'll also tackle the question of how they're *supposed* to.¹

Weeks 12-15: Current issues

Once again diverging from the textbook, here we'll examine a number of prominent issues in American politics today, and how they evolved from both these historic cleavages and institutions.

Class Schedule

Note: I am expecting some material to extend past the scheduled lecture time. Class on October 4th will be reserved for any lecture material that hasn't been discussed. Week #11 may be swapped out for other material; I will discuss this as we get closer to the date.

WEEK 1 – Syllabus Discussion

August 30th – Syllabus Discussion

WEEK 2 – Introduction & Theoretical Foundations

Recommended Reading:

- Kollman 2018, ch. 1

¹ A little hint for your exams: don't get the three-layer system mixed up with the three-branch system.

~~September 4th—Labor Day (no class)~~

September 6th – The “Why” of the United States

WEEK 3 – Constitution

Will finish off material from previous week.

Recommended Reading:

- Kollman 2018, ch. 2
- Kollman 2019, ch. 2

September 11th – History & Principles of the Constitution

September 13th – Cont. & Leading into Next Week

WEEK 4 – Content of the Constitution

Recommended Reading:

- Kollman 2018, ch. 3-4
- Kollman 2019, ch. 3-4

September 18th – Federalism

Conferences start

September 20st – Civil Rights & Liberties

WEEK 5 – Parties and the Mass Public, Before the Civil War

Recommended Reading:

- Ahmed, Amel. 2014. *Democracy and the Politics of Electoral System Choice: Engineering Electoral Dominance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-32, 89-117. Excerpt available on MyCourses.
- De Tocqueville, Alexis. 1838. *Democracy in America*, chapters 2-4. Available online.

~~September 25th—Yom Kippur (no class)~~

September 27th – Before the Civil War

Writing Assignment #1 due Wednesday, September 27th

WEEK 6 – Parties and the Mass Public, After the Civil War

Recommended Reading:

- Douglass, Frederick. 1866. "Reconstruction." *The Atlantic Monthly* 18(110): 761-765. Available online.
- Lincoln, Abraham. 1865. "Second Inaugural Address." Available online.
- Moore Jr., Barrington. 1966. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 111-149. Excerpt available on MyCourses.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. 1921. *The Frontier in American History*, chapters 9-10. Available online.

Recommended Listening:

- Petty, Tom. 1985. "Rebel." On *Southern Accents*. MCA Records.
- Simone, Nina. 1964. "Mississippi Goddam." On *Nina Simone in Concert*. Phillips Records.

October 2nd – Lecture

October 4th – Class reserved for any leftover material

~~WEEK 7 – No class – Reading break~~

WEEK 8 – The Legislative Branch

Recommended Reading:

- Kollman 2018, ch. 5
- Kollman 2019, ch. 5

October 16th – Responsibilities and rules

Remote midterm posted online

October 18th – Applications over time

Remote midterm due Friday, October 20

WEEK 9 – The Executive Branch

Recommended Reading:

- Kollman 2018, ch. 6
- Kollman 2019, ch. 6

October 23th – Responsibilities and rules

October 25th – Applications Over Time

WEEK 10 – The Judicial Branch

Recommended Reading:

- Kollman 2018, ch. 8
- Kollman 2019, ch. 8

October 30st – Responsibilities and rules

November 1st – Applications Over Time

WEEK 11 – The Bureaucracy (may swap this out for other material)

Recommended Reading:

- Kollman 2018, ch. 7
- Kollman 2019, ch. 7

November 6th – Responsibilities and rules

November 8th – Applications Over Time

WEEK 12 – Race, Class, and Inequality – Roots and Policy Implications

Recommended Reading:

- Alexander, Michelle. 2012. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in The Age of Colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press, chapters 1-2. Available on MyCourses.
- Wallace, George C. 1963. “The Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace.” Content warning: racist, offensive language. Available on MyCourses.

November 13th – Roots

November 15th – Policy Implications

WEEK 13 – Controversies in Religion and State, Roots & Policy Implications

Recommended reading:

- Cruz, Ted. 2015. “Keynote Speech: Rally for Religious Liberty.” Available at <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?327740-1/senator-ted-cruz-r-tx-religious-rally-des-moines-iowa>>. Published August 21, 2015. Accessed June 13, 2020.
- Du Mez, Kirsten Kobes. 2020. *Jesus and John Wayne: How Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. New York, NY: Liveright Publishing, chapters 1-2. Available on MyCourses.
- Robertson, Pat. 1991. *The New World Order: It Will Change the Way You Live*. Nashville, TN: Word Publishing. Excerpt available on MyCourses.

November 20th – Roots

November 22nd – Policy Implications

Writing Assignment #2 due Friday, November 24

WEEK 14 – Controversies in the Rural Consciousness Movement, Roots & Policy Implications

Recommended Reading:

- Cramer, Katherine. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-25. Excerpt available on MyCourses.
- Putnam, Robert. 1995. “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” *Journal of Democracy* 6(1): 65-78.
- Scala, Dante J. and Kenneth M. Johnson. 2017. “Political Polarization along the Rural-Urban Continuum? The Geography of the Presidential Vote, 2000-2016.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 672(1): pp. 162-184.

Recommended Listening:

- Springsteen, Bruce. 1995. “Youngstown.” On *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. Columbia Records.
- Springsteen, Bruce. 1984. “My Hometown.” On *Born in the U.S.A.* Columbia Records.

November 27th – Roots

November 29th – Policy Implications

Last week of conferences

WEEK 15 – Other Issues and Future Considerations

December 4th – E Pluribus Plenum?

Remote Final Exam will be given during the exam period.

Language of submission

In accord with McGill University’s [Charter of Students’ Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded.

Conformément à [la Charte des droits de l’étudiant](#) de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté.

Academic integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under

the [Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#)” (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003) (See [McGill’s guide to academic honesty](#) for more information).

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon [le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et procédures disciplinaires](#) » (Énoncé approuvé par le Sénat le 29 janvier 2003) (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le [guide pour l'honnêteté académique de McGill](#).)