

# American Politics and Government

## *Syllabus*

G. Darl Lewis

December 3, 2019

### Course Overview

The United States is one of the world's oldest democracies. It is the world's largest economy and the third most-populous country. How did 13 agrarian colonies evolve into such a dominant power over the course of 200 years? What political and institutional elements drove this transformation, and how do they continue to shape the American experience today? This course will address these questions through a survey of American government from the founding debates through the contentious 2020 elections. We will explore the impact of American institutions from a variety of perspectives and introduce the tools of analysis for American Politics and Political Science more generally.

Rather than simply focusing on the mechanics of the American system, we will focus on a number of key questions about the American political system and use these question to develop our understanding of the political institutions, processes, and behaviors that govern our life today. Some of these question will include:

- What is the role of the Constitution in shaping American political development and policy?
- How has federalism affected the policies and preferences of the electorate?
- Do unelected judges protect or hinder democracy?
- Is the bureaucracy democratically accountable?
- Why is it so difficult for third parties to make inroads in the United States?
- Does the media unfairly distort our perception of the government?
- What is the role of the president?
- Who do politicians respond to?
- What is the impact of a single vote?

## Instructors

Darl Lewis

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Office: *Office Location*

Office Hours: *Time and Place*

Lectures: *Time and Place*

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## Materials and Prerequisites

There is no prerequisite for the class; however students must have a basic understanding of the American political system (A robust high-school course is sufficient). If you are concerned about your background in this area, feel free to meet with me to discuss your background. You may also wish to check out the following books (any edition is fine):

- Theodore Lowi, et al. 2017. *American Government: Power and Purpose*, 14th ed., W.W. Norton & Co.
- Samuel Kernell and Steven Smith. 2007. *Principles and Practice of American Politics* 4th ed., CQ Press.

Of course, there are plenty of other resources available for general reference; do not feel bound by these books in particular.

Weekly readings will consist of a mix of academic and popular articles, historical documents, and legal documents, as well as occasional book chapters. Many of these will be freely accessible online, however, I will also post them on the course website. Be sure to complete any required readings before coming to class. I am, of course, happy to answer any questions or address any confusion in lecture, but in order to identify those difficult concepts beforehand, it is imperative that you attempt the reading beforehand.

All readings will be listed on the following pages. Note, however, that this list may and likely will change over the course of the semester subject to the strengths and interests of the class, as well as current developments. American politics is rapidly evolving and as such, there is new material being generated on a daily basis. Indeed, I encourage you to be on the lookout for news that may be relevant to this class and to bring it to my attention if you do come across such material.

## Assignments and Grading

While each of these assignments will be discussed in detail during class, I summarize each graded assignment here:

- *Attendance and Participation (15%)*: Each student should attend class regularly and participate in the day's discussion. This will require having read the assigned materials beforehand.
- *Constitution Project (35%)*: Students will form groups to serve as committees in a mock constitutional convention to take place in class at the end of the semester. Each group will propose a constitutional amendment (due during the midterm period) to be debated and voted on during this convention. Students will also individually prepare a 2000-word final paper modeled after the federalist and anti-federalist papers that argues for or against a given proposal. This paper will be due at the time of the convention.
- *Midterm Paper (15%)*: Students should develop a 2000-word paper responding to a major judicial decision by the United States Supreme Court. We will discuss several such cases in class during the first half of the semester, but you may, in consultation with myself, choose to analyze any major case. With this paper, you should consider the statutory and/or constitutional basis for the decision and provide an argument in support or opposition to the Court's conclusions. While I do not expect it to be formatted at such, you might look at amicus briefs that you see before the court today for inspiration. This paper will be due during the midterm period.
- *Policy Memos (15%)*: Convincing a congressman or woman to support a given proposal is a difficult job. Legislators have little time and lots to do. Over the course of the semester, you will write two policy memos (500 words max) to convince a legislator to either support or oppose a current bill before Congress or a state legislature. On these memos, it is important to quickly address the pros and cons of the bill in question, consider the alternatives, and come to a convincing conclusion before losing your audience. This is a surprisingly difficult challenge and should not be left to the last minute. The first memo will be due at the end of Week 4, and the second will be due the end of Week 10.
- *Final Exam (20%)*: The essay-based exam will be held during the regularly scheduled exam period.

### Late Policy

As a general rule, I do not accept late work. If you request an extension for a compelling reason, you must obtain approval in writing (email is fine) prior to the deadline. Without prior approval, a doctor's or dean's note is required.

# Schedule

Each week will focus on a different development in American Politics. As a rule, we will progress through time from the founding of the United States to today; however, throughout the semester we will discuss developments using a combination of historical and contemporary techniques in a way that allows us to both appreciate the conditions under which the American state developed and to understand the basis for those developments based on our modern understanding of political institutions and behavior. As such, there will necessarily be significant overlap between the past and the present.

1. **Week 1: *Introduction, the 2016 Election, and the Structure of American Government***
2. **Week 2: *Origins of the American Political Systems and the Constitution***
3. **Week 3: *Federalism in the Laboratories of Democracy***
4. **Week 4: *Congress and the Rise of Faction***
5. **Week 5: *The Supreme Court and the Counter-Majoritarian Difficulty***
6. **Week 6: *Separation of Powers and the Presidency***
7. **Week 7: *The Civil War and Nation-Building***
8. **Week 8: *Suffrage, Civil Rights, and the Popular Vote***
9. **Week 9: *A New Deal and the Administrative State***
10. **Week 10: *Philosopher Kings in the New Civil Rights Era***
11. **Week 11: *The Regulatory State, Welfare, and Representation***
12. **Week 12: *New Media and a Polarized America***
13. **Week 13: *State Politics in the 21st Century***
14. **Week 14: *Special Topic on Current Events, TBD***