

What's the Matter with American Politics? ... And How Can We Fix It?

What is the matter with American politics? Why has it become so polarized and dysfunctional? How serious a threat to the future of American democracy are our current divisions and dysfunctions? How is it that an individual with no political experience and opposed by virtually every newspaper in the country got elected president in 2016? To what extent is Donald Trump a symptom and to what extent is he the cause of what ails the American political system? And what are the prospects for constructive change in the future? What can be done to fix American politics and preserve American democracy? These are among the big questions that we will explore this semester.

Each week we will read a recently published book that tackles the question of what's gone wrong with American politics and examines the prospects for reform. I hope that this class will be unlike any other you have taken at Willamette University, more like a book group than a conventional course. Most courses, even discussion-centered ones, revolve around the professor. In this class, in contrast, the discussion will be the responsibility of everyone—in every class session not just a select few classes. You will all be responsible for submitting discussion questions at several junctures in the week leading up to the class meeting (typically Sunday and Tuesday evenings).

Two thirds of your grade will be based on your participation in class discussion and your preparation for those discussions, including the discussion questions that you prepare for each of the readings. More talking does not necessarily translate into a higher grade; indeed, cultivating the art of listening is every bit as important to creating a productive conversation. However, passing the class does require carefully preparing for class and contributing meaningfully to discussion. The success of this class very much depends on each of us reading closely and engaging each other thoughtfully and respectfully.

The other third of your grade will be based on a final take-home essay of no more than 3,000 words that will be due Saturday, May 9, 2020, at 7 pm. This paper will not be a research paper and will not require any outside reading. It will instead be a close engagement with the texts and the questions that we explore together during the semester.

If you miss a class for whatever reason, you must write a 750 word paper analyzing the reading that was assigned for the day you miss. Make-up papers are due within a week of your return to class; failure to turn in a make-up paper by the due date time will result in a full letter grade deduction from your participation grade.

The emphasis on class participation in the grading reflects the course's principal student learning outcomes. Specifically, I will assess your performance in this class based on your demonstrated ability to:

- (1) contribute constructively to class discussions, which involves both meaningful participation in discussion and leaving room for others to contribute
- (2) articulate cogent arguments and textual analysis that respond both to the texts and to the arguments advanced by classmates
- (3) provide textual evidence in support of claims advanced in class discussion
- (4) formulate fruitful or illuminating discussion questions

Schedule of Class Meetings

1. Jan 22 Introduction
2. Jan 29: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018)
3. Feb 5: Richard Stengel, *Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle against Disinformation* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2019)
4. Feb 12: Monica Prasad, *Starving the Beast: Ronald Reagan and the Tax Cut Revolution* (Russell Sage, 2018)
5. Feb 19: Suzanne Mettler, *The Government-Citizen Disconnect* (Russell Sage, 2018)
6. Feb 26: Caitlin Zaloom, *Indebted: How Families Make College Work at any Cost* (Princeton University Press, 2019)
7. March 4: Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler, *Prius or Pickup? How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018)
8. March 11: Jonathan A. Rodden, *Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide* (Basic Books, 2019)
9. March 18: Zoltan Hajnal, *Dangerously Divided: How Race and Class Shape Winning and Losing in American Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2020)
- Spring Break
10. April 1: Alex Hertel-Fernandez, *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States—and the Nation* (Oxford University Press, 2019)
11. April 8 David Vogel, *California Greenin' How the Golden State Became an Environmental Leader* (Princeton University Press, 2018)
12. April 15 Michael Lewis, *The Fifth Risk* (Norton, 2018)
13. April 22: SSRD
14. April 29: Conclusion