

What's the Matter with American Politics?

What is the matter with American politics? Why can't Washington seem to get anything done anymore? And how is it that an individual with no political experience and opposed by almost every newspaper in the country could get elected president? What can we learn from Donald Trump's unlikely election about the current state of American politics? And what are the prospects for constructive change in the future? 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—with special focus in the first half of the class on understanding the conditions that made possible Trump's ascendance to power—and examines the prospects for fixing what's wrong with American politics.

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. To make it feel more like a book group, I propose that we meet in different student residences.

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 translate into a higher grade, but passing the class does require carefully preparing for class and contributing meaningfully and consistently to class discussion. The success of this class very much depends on everybody preparing for and contributing to each and every class discussion. The other one third of your grade will be based on a final take-home essay of no more than 4,000 words that will be due Saturday, May 6, 2017 at 10 pm. This paper will not be a research paper and will not require outside reading. It will instead be a close examination of the texts and questions that we explore together this 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 a make-up paper in on time will result in a full 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 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 18 Introduction: The Meaning of Trump
2. Jan 25 George Packer, *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014)
3. Feb 1 Second half of Packer, *The Unwinding*
4. Feb 8 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New Press, 2016)
5. Feb 15 Katherine Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (University of Chicago Press, 2016)
6. Feb 22 Justin Guest, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (Oxford University Press, 2016)
7. March 1 Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan Hajnal, *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2015)
8. March 8 Marc Hetherington and Thomas Rudolph, *Why Washington Won't Work: Polarization, Political Trust, and the Governing Crisis* (University of Chicago Press, 2015)
9. March 15 Matt Grossman and David Hopkins, *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats* (Oxford University Press, 2016)
10. March 22 Yuval Levin, *The Fractured Republic: Renewing America's Social Contract in the Age of Individualism* (Basic Books, 2016)
- Spring Break
11. April 5 Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *American Amnesia: How the War on Government Led us to Forget What Made America Prosper* (Simon & Schuster, 2016)
12. April 12 Jason Grumet, *City of Rivals: Restoring the Glorious Mess of American Democracy* (Lyons Press, 2014)
13. April 19 SSRD
14. April 26 Conclusions