

## AMERICAN POLITICS

This course aims to deepen your understanding of the theory and practice of American politics. More specifically, my goals in this class (the learning objectives, in others words) are to help you (1) to evaluate how well American governmental institutions, practices, and processes measure up to normative and constitutional theories, and (2) to analyze the efficacy and desirability of alternative institutional arrangements and political reforms.

We will devote the opening weeks to assessing the health of our democratic institutions and our attitudes toward those institutions. We will be asking questions such as: Is our democracy at risk? Are our institutions fragile or are they relatively robust? What are the consequences of low levels of citizen trust in government? How do we build trust in government and our fellow citizens?

The next section of the course focuses on elections, the primary institution through which citizen preferences are translated into public policy, but it also engages broader varieties of citizen engagement, including protests. Questions to be addressed here include: Who votes, who doesn't, and does it matter? How does protesting affect political change? What should we do, if anything, to encourage more people to participate in the political process? How will the pandemic affect voting? How well does the current electoral system work and how well is it likely to work in the upcoming election? What can we do to make it work better? Should we change the nominating process? Should we at last abolish the electoral college?

In the third section of the course we will also examine political and legal issues surrounding voting rights, with special focus on redistricting (aka gerrymandering) and reapportionment. With respect to redistricting, the questions we explore include whether partisan gerrymandering should be justiciable, how much race can or should be considered in drawing district lines, how best to understand and implement the right to an equally weighted vote, and whether *Shelby County v. Holder* was correctly decided.

During the final section of the class, we will examine the three major national political institutions: Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court. We will ask how well these institutions work and whether they could be made to work better. Questions include: Would proportional representation improve the functioning of the House of Representatives? Is it time at last to abolish the filibuster in the US Senate? Has the presidency grown too powerful, or is the real problem that the president lacks the power to do what the people elected him to do? Is it fair or prudent to have Supreme Court justices elected for life? Does the constitutional structure created over two hundred years ago need to be fundamentally changed? Is it time perhaps for a rethinking of our democracy, maybe even for a new constitutional convention?

Your grade will be based on two take-home essays (each worth 33% of your grade) and class participation (worth 33%). The participation grade is based not only on attendance and participation in class discussions but also on any written assignments related to preparation for class discussion, including emails I ask you to send me before class indicating which side of a debate you wish to take. A passing grade on the participation component is required to pass the class. Given the uncertainty introduced by COVID-19, it is possible that these assignments and the grade percentages will change.

The books to be purchased are Richard J. Ellis and Michael Nelson, ed., *Debating Reform: Conflicting Perspectives on How to Fix the American Political System* (CQ Press, 2020; 4<sup>th</sup> ed.); and Martin Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?* (2020; 5<sup>th</sup> ed.). It's crucial that you have the current edition and not previous editions of these books. The other readings indicated in the syllabus are available as pdfs on the class WISE site. In addition, you should read a newspaper daily, preferably something like

the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* but other newspapers with robust coverage of national politics are acceptable.

Readings available on WISE should be printed out and brought to class, at least so long as we are able to continue in-person instruction. In class (whether we are in-person or remote) you should always have the reading for that day in front of you. As a general rule, so long as we are in person, no laptops or other electronic devices may be used during class (obviously that does not apply to students taking the course remotely). This will also help ensure the university has sufficient bandwidth to support remote learning across the campus. No texting or other use of your phone should take place in class.

Please inform me of any disabilities that will affect your participation in this course and any accommodations authorized by the Office of Disabilities Services. I expect you to be familiar with Willamette's Plagiarism and Cheating Policy

Office hours will be by appointment (my email is [rellis@willamette.edu](mailto:rellis@willamette.edu)) and will generally take place via Zoom, although I am also happy to meet in-person so long as we are able to meet outside.

## Schedule of Class Topics and Readings

### I. GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENS

#### 1.1 (Aug 25) Introduction: Our Information Bubbles

Anne Applebaum, "The Facts Just Aren't Getting Through," *The Atlantic*, August 9, 2020,

#### 1-2 (Aug. 27) Are American Political Institutions Robust or Fragile?

Masha Gessen, "Autocracy: Rules for Survival," *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 10, 2016

Masha Gessen on "The frightening fragility of America's political institutions," The Ezra Klein Show, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/frightening-fragility-americas-political-institutions/id1081584611?i=1000483702606>

#### 2-1 (Sept. 1) Trust in Government and Democracy

Russell J. Dalton, "Political trust in North America," in Sonja Zmerli and Tom van der Meer, eds., *Handbook on Political Trust* (London: Edward Elgar, 2017), 375-394

Nathaniel Persily and Jon Cohen, "Americans are losing faith in democracy—and in each other," *Washington Post*, October 14, 2016

Sean Illing, "Why so many people who need the government hate it," August 17, 2018, *Vox.com* (an edited transcript of a conversation with Suzanne Mettler)

Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* (July 2016), 5-17

#### 2-2 (Sept. 3) Do we need Stronger Gatekeepers?

Jonathan Rauch and Ray La Raja, "Too Much Democracy is Bad for Democracy," *Atlantic*, December 2019

Ezra Klein, "Donald Trump's Success Reveals a Frightening Weakness in American Democracy," *Vox*, Nov. 7, 2016

Frances Lee, "Populism and the American Party System: Opportunities and Constraints," *Perspectives on Politics* (2019), 370-388

## II. VOTING AND ELECTIONS

3-1 (Sept 8) The Adults' Lament: Why Don't the Young Know More About Politics?

Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People*, chapters 1-3

Margaret Sullivan, "The Unregulated Toll Bridge," from *Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the Crisis of American Democracy* (2020), 36-49

Watch John Oliver clip at [https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=bq2\\_wSsDwkQ](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=bq2_wSsDwkQ)

3-2 (Sept. 10) No class, American Political Science Association Virtual Convention

4-1 (Sept. 15) Is there a Turnout Problem?

Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People*, chapters 4-6, 8-9

4-2 (Sept 17) Two Solutions: Compulsory Voting and Deliberation Day

Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People?* chapter 10

Jason Brennan (con) debates "Resolved, the United States should adopt compulsory voting," *Debating Reform*, 146-154

Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin, *Deliberation Day* (Yale, 2004), 3-14, 17-39

5.1 (Sept 22) Is There a New Civic Engagement? How Hopeful Should We Be?

Wattenberg, *Is Voting for Young People*, chapter 7

Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics* (CQ Press, 2016, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 26-30, 34-36, 39-46, 60-87

Thea Riofrancos, "It's a Tough Time for the Left. But I'm More Optimistic Than Ever," *New York Times*, August 9, 2020

Webinar with Megan Ming Francis, Daniel Q. Gillion, and Lara Putnam, on "The Protests and U.S. Democracy," June 26, 2020, <https://americandemocracycollaborative.org/2020/06/15/democracy-20-20/>

5-2 (Sept. 24) The Politics of Ballot Access: Photo ID Laws, Early Voting, and Vote by Mail

Spencer Overton, *Stealing Democracy: The New Politics of Voter Suppression* (Norton 2006), 42-64 (Chapter 2, "Patchwork Democracy")

Michael Nelson (Pro) and Keith Bentele and Erin O'Brien (Con) debate "Resolved, States should enact voter ID laws and reduce early voting," *Debating Reform*, 99-117

David Graham, "The 'Blue Shift' Will Decide the Election," *The Atlantic*, August 10, 2020

Webinar with Amel Ahmed, Jacob Grumbach, Richard Hasen, on "Can the United States Have Free and Fair Elections This Fall?" July 21, 2020, <https://global.cornell.edu/news/democracy-2020-can-us-hold-free-and-fair-elections-fall>

6-1 (Sept 29) Should we adopt a National Presidential Primary?

Michael Nelson and Andrew Busch debate: "Resolved, political parties should nominate candidates for the presidency through a national primary," in *Debating the Presidency*, ed. Richard J. Ellis and Michael Nelson (CQ Press 2020; 5<sup>th</sup> ed), 36-54

David Redlawsk (Con), typescript, from the debate on "Resolved, political parties should nominate candidates for president in a national primary," in Richard J. Ellis and Michael Nelson *Debating Reform* (CQ Press 3<sup>rd</sup> ed)

Barbara Norrander, *The Imperfect Primary: Oddities, Biases, and Strengths of U.S. Presidential Nomination Politics* (Routledge, 2020; 3rd edition), 129-135 (“Alternative Mechanisms for Counting the Votes in a National Primary”)

6-2. (Oct. 1) Should we abolish the Electoral College?

George C. Edwards III (Pro) and Gary L. Gregg II (Con) debate “Resolved, the electoral college should be abolished,” *Debating Reform*, 265-284

7-1 (Oct. 6) No class

7-2 (Oct. 8) Essay #1 due

### III. DRAWING LINES: VOTING RIGHTS AND REDISTRICTING

8-1 (Oct. 13) Ruling on the Voting Rights Act

*Shelby County v. Holder* (2013)

8-2 (Oct. 15) Race and Redistricting

Charles S. Bullock III, *Redistricting: The Most Political Activity in America* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), chap 3 (“Minorities and Redistricting”)

9-1 (Oct. 20) The Politics of Congressional Redistricting

Charles S. Bullock III, *Redistricting*, chap. 4 (on redistricting criteria)

Ruth Greenwood (Pro) and Justin Buchler (Con) debate “Resolved, the redistricting process should be nonpartisan,” *Debating Reform*, 207-228

### IV. REFORMING CONGRESS, THE PRESIDENCY, AND THE COURTS

9-2 (Oct. 22) The Undemocratic Senate

Bruce I. Oppenheimer (Pro) and John J. Pitney, Jr. (Con) debate “Resolved, the Senate should represent people not states,” *Debating Reform*, 229-244

10-1 (Oct. 27) Adopt Proportional Representation in the House of Representatives

Douglas Amy (Pro) and Brendan Doherty (Con) debate “Resolved, proportional representation should be adopted for U.S. House elections,” *Debating Reform*, 185-206

10.2 (Oct. 29) Repeal the 22nd Amendment

David Crockett (Pro) and Michael Korzi (Con) debate “Resolved, the Twenty-second Amendment should be repealed,” *Debating Reform*, 285-301

11-1 (Nov. 3) Make Government More Responsible

Larry Sabato, *A More Perfect Constitution* (Walker & Company, 2007), 76-96

Ezra Klein, “The Unpersuaded,” *New Yorker*, March 19, 2012

11-2 (Nov. 5) What Just Happened? Understanding The 2020 Election

Reading TBA

12-1 (Nov. 10) Abolish the Filibuster

Steven S. Smith (Pro) and Wendy Schiller (Con) debate “Resolved, Senate Rule XXII should be amended so that legislative filibusters can be ended by a majority vote,” *Debating Reform*, 245-264

12-2 (Nov. 12) Reform the Judicial Appointment Process

David Yalof (Pro) and John Maltese (Con) debate “Resolved the president has too much power in the selection of judges,” from *Debating the Presidency*, ed. Richard Ellis and Michael Nelson (CQ Press 2020; 5<sup>th</sup> ed), 250-272

13-1 (Nov. 17) End Lifetime Tenure for Supreme Court Justices

David Karol (Pro) and Ward Farnsworth (Con) debate “Resolved, the terms of Supreme Court Justices should be limited to eighteen years,” *Debating Reform*, 320-340

13-2 (Nov. 19) Should we call a Constitutional Convention?

Sanford Levinson (Pro) and David Kyvig (Con) debate “Resolved, Article V should be revised to make it easier to amend the Constitution and to call a constitutional convention,” from *Debating Reform*, 1-18

Larry Sabato, "Calling the Twenty-First Century Constitutional Convention," in *A More Perfect Constitution* (Walker & Company, 2007), 198-208, 211-219

14-1 (Nov. 24) Conclusion: The Future of American Democracy

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, “Saving Democracy,” chapter 9 in *How Democracies Die* (Crown, 2018), 204-231

Ronald Brownstein, “Can Majority Rule Survive America’s Widening Political Divide,” *CNN.com*, August 11, 2020

Essay #2: Due Friday, December 4, 5pm