

PLSC 101

## **Politics of American Democracy**

Albion College-Fall 2018

Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, 1:00-2:05 (Robinson 402)

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Office hours: Monday 10:00-11:00 and Friday 2:00-3:00, Robinson Rm. 303

### **Course catalog description**

An overview of the dynamics and structure of the American political system: the Constitution, civil liberties, Congress, the Presidency, bureaucracy, interest groups, political parties, and voting behavior. Contrasts the principles of democratic action with a behind-the-scenes examination of how public policy is actually made.

### **Academic integrity**

All students are expected to understand and follow the College's guidelines regarding academic integrity: "As an academic community, Albion College is firmly committed to honor and integrity in the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, as a member of this academic community, each student acknowledges responsibility for this or her actions and commits to the highest standards of integrity. In doing so, each student makes a covenant with the college not to engage in any form of academic dishonesty, fraud, cheating or theft" (Albion Catalog). Suspected violations will be reported to the student and the college officials immediately. Confirmed instances of academic dishonesty may result in failure of the course and other consequences as outlined by the College. If you are unsure about whether your actions may fall under these guidelines, please do not hesitate to speak with me about your concerns.

### **Course requirements**

The course is a combination of lecture and in-class activities. There is something due before or during each class period. If you do not attend class regularly, you cannot do well in this course. Your grade will be determined by:

- Midterm exam (30%),
- Final exam (30%),
- Monday exercises (**E**), Wednesday discussion questions (**Q**), Friday group discussion (**G**) (40%).
  - Monday exercises are distributed and completed in class – the preliminary topics are listed on the syllabus.
  - Wednesday discussion questions are a one-page answer to a question related to the readings – distributed the first day of class.
  - Friday group discussion questions are distributed and completed in class
- The grades for the discussion questions, exercises, and group discussion are credit/no-credit, and you must attend class to receive credit. You can get full credit if you complete 27 out of the 29 exercises and discussion questions so that you may miss up to two classes without penalty.

## Grading scale and formulas

This hypothetical example demonstrates how your final grade will be calculated:

1. Earning 25 points for in-class activities amounts to 89.3% (i.e., 25/28). Your percentage score will then be transformed to standard numeric grade using the following formula:  $\frac{X}{20} - 1$ , so in this example your grade for this part of the class would be 3.47.
2. You will be able to earn a maximum of 50 points for both midterm and final exams. Let's say you obtained 45 points on your midterm, which amounts to 90% (i.e., 45/50). Your percentage score will once again be transformed to standard numeric grade using the following formula:  $\frac{X}{20} - 1$ , so in this example your grade for this part of the class would be 3.50. The same procedure will be applied to your final.
3. Your three grades are then weighted to receive one numeric grade. If your scores were:
  - a. In class participation = 3.47 (worth 40%)
  - b. Midterm = 3.50 (worth 30%)
  - c. Final = 3.10 (worth 30%)Your overall numeric grade would be 3.37.
4. Finally your numeric grade is applied to Albion's scale:

Albion's Scale	Score Needed
4.0	3.8 and above
3.7	3.79-3.50
3.3	3.49-3.15
3.0	3.14-2.85
2.7	2.84-2.50
2.3	2.49-2.15
2.0	2.14-1.85
1.7	1.84-1.50
1.3	1.49-1.15
1.0	1.14-0.85
0.0	0.84 and below

5. 3.37 would translate to 3.3 on your official transcript.

### Textbook

Janda, Kenneth, Jeffrey M. Berry, Jerry Goldman and Deborah Schildkraut. *The Challenge of Democracy: American Government in Global Politics*. 14th Edition.

### Other notes

- Be sure to regularly check your albion.edu email for course announcements.
- Please refrain from using technology – cellphones, laptops – during the class period.
- Audio recordings are not allowed.
- If the vocabulary of American politics is unfamiliar to you, it may be a good idea for you to read political coverage in a major daily newspaper (New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal), other online news source (CNN, FOX, Daily Beast, or Bloomberg) or watch the NewsHour on PBS.
- Please bring your textbook to class
- You are responsible for contacting appropriate offices if you need special accommodations for exams. I need to be informed about such events at least two weeks in advance.

## **Weekly Schedule**

### **Week 1**

27 August.

Read Challenge, Chapter 1

Monday. Introduction

Wednesday. What is the most important problem facing the nation?

Friday. No class-Dr. Tatarczyk attending academic conference

### **Week 2**

3 September. American Politics: The Contemporary Context

Read Challenge, Chapter 1

Monday. No class-Labor Day

Wednesday. E1. What is the difference between a liberal and a conservative?

Friday. G1.

### **Week 3**

10 September. American Democracy: The Constitution

Read Challenge, Chapters 2 and 3 and the Appendix, pages A3-A18

Monday. E2. What are the essential features of democracy?

Wednesday. Q1. Is the U.S. a majoritarian or pluralist democracy?

Friday. G2.

### **Week 4**

17 September. American Democracy: Federalism

Read Challenge, Chapter 4

Monday. E3. Which level of government – local, federal or state – is more democratic?

Wednesday. Q2. What are the benefits and drawbacks of transferring programs to the states?

Friday. G3.

### **Week 5**

24 September. Public Opinion and Sources of Political Information

Read Challenge, Chapters 5 and 6

Monday. E4. How do people learn about politics?

Wednesday. Q3. Do the broadcast media help or frustrate democratic government?

Friday. G4.

### **Week 6**

1 October. Participation: Interest Groups

Read Challenge, Chapter 10

Monday. In class movie

Wednesday. Q4. How are your interests represented in Washington?

Friday. G5.

### **Week 7**

8 October.

Monday. Mid-term review

Wednesday. Mid-term review cont.

**Friday. Mid-term exam**

**Week 8**

15 October. Participation: Voting and Parties

Read Challenge, Chapter 7 and 8

Monday. No class-Fall Break

Wednesday. E5 and Q5. Should we make it easier to vote in federal elections?

Friday. G6.

**Week 9**

22 October. The Electoral Process

Read Challenge, Chapter 9

Monday. E6. Has money – campaign contributions – corrupted elections and politics?

Wednesday. Q6. Are elections really only about war and the economy?

Friday. G7.

**Week 10**

29 October. Congress: the problem of fragmentation and the role of political parties

Read Challenge, Chapter 11

Monday. E7. What do you know about your representative in Congress?

Wednesday. Q7. Should we repeal the ban on earmarks?

Friday. In class movie

**Week 11**

5 November. The President: the challenge of coordination

Read Challenge, Chapter 12

Monday. E8. Who were the most effective presidents and why?

Wednesday. No class-Dr. Tatarczyk attending academic conference

Friday. No class-Dr. Tatarczyk attending academic conference

**Week 12**

12 November. Judiciary: Federal Courts and the Supreme Court

Read Challenge, Chapter 14

Monday. E9. What Supreme Court decisions have had the greatest impact on your life?

Wednesday. Q8. Do contemporary presidents need more formal power in order to be effective?

Friday. G8.

**Week 13**

19 November. Civil Liberties and Civil Rights

Read Challenge, Chapters 15

Monday. E10. How do we balance the rule of law and religious freedom?

Wednesday. No class-Thanksgiving Break

Friday. No class-Thanksgiving Break

**Week 14**

26 November. Civil Liberties and Civil Rights

Read Challenge, Chapters 15

Monday. E11. How do we balance the rule of law and religious freedom? Cont.

Wednesday. Q9. Should we consider constitutional amendments to elect judges?

Friday. G9.

**Week 15**

3 December.

Monday. Healthcare Bill Case Study

Wednesday. Final exam review

Friday. Final exam review cont.

**Final Exam**

**Thursday, 13 December from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.**

**\*I reserve the right to amend this syllabus**

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**Wednesday Discussion Questions (Q)**

Throughout the semester, you will be writing one-page responses to questions that relate to the readings and the lectures. These questions serve several purposes. First, I want to encourage you to complete assigned reading and think about material *before* class: this will help you learn more in class. A second reason I assign questions is to give you frequent opportunities to write. People retain more when they discuss and write, as opposed to just reading and listening. Frequent writing also provides practice. A final purpose for questions is to motivate attendance. You must be present in class to receive credit for these assignments.

Please format questions with half inch margins at top and bottom, 1 inch margins at left and right, 12 point font, double line spacing. At the top, place your name and due date on one line. You may center a title below this, but a title is not required. Length is one page (about 250 words).

You are likely to see variations of these questions again on exams.

There are two possible scores on a question: 1 (good enough) and 0 (not good enough). **There are no late questions.** If you are not in the classroom to hand in a question, that will count as a zero.

**(see syllabus for due dates)**

Q1

Is the U.S. a majoritarian or pluralist democracy? What leads you to this conclusion? Be specific. (see pages 36-40 “Institutional Models of Democracy”).

Q2

There are some who advocate transferring control over public policy choices from the federal government to state governments. What are the primary benefits and drawbacks of this approach? (see pages 99-103, “Ideology, Policymaking and American Federalism”)

Q3

Do broadcast media help or frustrate democratic government? (see pages 163-9, “Functions of the Mass Media for the Political System”)

Q4

How are your interests represented in Washington? Are your interests and preferences represented more effectively by the major political parties (Democrats, Republicans) or by some combination of special interest groups (the NRA, for example). (see pages 276-8, “How Interest Groups Form?” and pages 223-7 “Party Identification in America”)

Q5

Should we make it easier to vote in federal elections? (see pages 196-98, “Low Voter Turnout in America”)

Q6

Are elections really only about war and the economy? Or do campaigns matter? What evidence could/did you use to support your answer? (use the notes from class and “Explaining Vote Choice”, pp. 260-4, for ideas or approaches to this question)

Q7

Should Congress maintain the ban on earmarks? (see pp. 322-3, “Pluralism versus Majoritarianism in Congress”)

Q8

President Obama is confronted with a number of serious challenges – threats related to ISIL, problems maintaining border security, demands for better care for returning veterans. Do contemporary presidents need more formal power in order to be effective? (see p.330-1, “The Constitutional Basis of Presidential Power”)

Q9

Should we consider constitutional amendments to permit election of judges? Or to introduce recall elections for judges? (see p. 405, “Judicial Selection in Global Politics”)