

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

ISS 2932—Contemporary Issues in American Politics—Fall 2014
Mondays and Wednesdays, 3:35-4:50

M. Scott Meachum • Office: Bellamy 227 • mmeachum@fsu.edu • Office Hours:
Tuesdays 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm (or by appointment made via email)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Turn on the television, open a newspaper or magazine, or simply check any one of your social media accounts and one fact becomes quickly apparent—the number of issues demanding our attention is nearly limitless. Are Beyonce and Jay Z really about to get a divorce? (No) Will Johnny Manziel start for the Cleveland Browns? (Not in the first game of the season) Exactly how terrible will the “Unauthorized *Saved by the Bell* Story” be? (very, very terrible). While (too) many people focus their energies on these and other similar questions, the purpose of this course is to examine and analyze current issues in American politics. Some of the issues, like the distribution of power between the state and federal governments, date back to the founding of the country. Others, like the application of the First Amendment to Internet speech, are uniquely suited to current times. Together, we will begin to explore some of the many issues that face politicians and citizens alike.

The structure of the course is similar to an introductory American government course in that we focus on the key actors, events and institutions that shape American politics. Unlike such a course, though, we read essays, contemporary news and opinion accounts, and other materials that put contemporary issues into a broader context. We will do a lot of reading, writing, and discussing as we build critical reading and thinking skills. We will focus on the midterm elections, the role of media in society and government, the impact of the United States Supreme Court, and many, many more topics and issues. By the end of this course, you will have an understanding of some pressing issues facing our society and, hopefully, some ideas about how to address them.

This course is designed as a seminar, which means that there will be a lot of discussion and interaction. While there will be some lectures, I hope to cover most of the material with you actively engaged with it.

COURSE READINGS

Many of the readings for this class will come from *Clued in to Politics*, which should be available in the campus bookstore. The full information for the book is:

Barbour, Christine and Matthew J. Streb. 2013. *Clued in to Politics: A Critical Thinking Reader in American Government*, 4th Edition. CQ Press. (Referred to in the syllabus as “Barbour and Streb”)

All other readings will be made available via the class Blackboard site or can be found on the Internet.

BLACKBOARD

This course is supported by a Blackboard website to which you should all have access. Along with the syllabus and additional readings that I post there, I will also use the site to send out announcements, e-mails, and/or other communications. As such, you are expected to regularly check the course site as well your own FSU email account that is associated with it. Additionally, I can be contacted through the site as well as at the email address listed above.

COURSE EVALUATION AND ASSIGNMENTS

Final grades will be based on the following scale:

Percent	Letter Grade	Percent	Letter Grade	Percent	Letter Grade
93 - 100	A	80 - 82	B-	67 - 69	D+
90 - 92	A-	77 - 80	C+	63 - 66	D
87 - 89	B+	73 - 76	C	60 - 62	D-
83 - 86	B	70 - 72	C-	0 - 59	F

Midterm and Final Examinations (20% each, 40% Total)

There are two examinations in this class, and each will be in-class and closed book. Each is comprehensive in scope, meaning that any material covered by the date of the exam in the readings, in class lectures, or in class discussion might be on the test. I will provide more detail as to the structure of each exam prior to the dates that are listed for each in the schedule below.

Election Paper and Presentation (15%)

This November Americans will elect 35 United States Senators, 435 United States House of Representatives, and 36 governors. The midterm elections, so named because they fall in the middle of the President's term in office, are often seen as a statement either for or against the current commander-in-chief, the administration, and the policies the administration has enacted or is pursuing. Invariably, the elections lead to a change in the balance of power at the state and federal levels. You will be assigned one of the more competitive House races this fall and be responsible for writing a 4-5 page paper that analyzes the election. You will learn about the candidates, the issues, the campaigns, and ultimately make a prediction as to who will win. Then, on November 3rd, you will give a very brief overview of the race to the class so that we can be prepared for election results the next day. We will review more details regarding the paper later in the semester.

Contemporary Issues Paper (15%)

Given that the focus of this course is contemporary issues in American politics, you are required to write a 6-7 page paper that analyzes a particular issue. This will require you to follow news and analysis of your topic and be able to explain both why it is important and how you think the issue should be decided. I will provide a list of suggested topics, but you are welcome to suggest a topic that is not on that list. So long as I approve of it, you can write on it. Like your election paper, I will provide additional details on this assignment later in the semester.

Participation (15%)

This is a small class and is meant to be discussion oriented. This means that you need to come to class prepared—having read the material *before* class—and be ready to actively contribute to class. Your participation grade will be based on your daily

preparation, your in-class contributions, and your active engagement with both the course materials and your classmates. There is no attendance requirement as such, but as you must be present to participate, frequent absences will negatively affect your participation grade. Excused absences (medical emergencies, family emergencies, university functions) will of course not be counted against you.

Current Events Quizzes and Discussion (5% each, 15% Total)

While, we will discuss current events throughout the semester, we will spend the better part of three classes (see dates in course schedule) discussing some of major events in American politics. The quizzes will focus on news stories covered in major publications in the previous week, and you are expected to be able to summarize and discuss articles (that relate to American politics) that you find interesting.

Additional Notes About Grades

If you have a specific question regarding the grade you receive on an assignment, I am happy to discuss that with you. However, you should email me to set up an appointment and include in the email the basis for your question and an explanation for why the grade should be changed.

Grades that end in .5 or higher are rounded up to the nearest whole percentage point.

CLASSROOM POLICIES AND EXPECTATIONS

1. Make up examinations are given only with prior instructor approval and/or appropriate documentation of a medical or family emergency. Please notify me as soon as you know that you cannot attend either of the scheduled exams so alternate arrangements can be made.
2. As a courtesy to the class, cell phones and other electronic devices should be turned off or set to silent/vibrate before class begins and put away. Failure to do so will result in a deduction in your Participation grade. Additionally, while you are free to use laptops to take notes in class, I expect that that their use will be limited to that purpose. If I become aware that you are using your computer for reasons other than to enhance classroom learning, your Participation grade will suffer.

3. The classroom is a place for mutual respect. You are all adults, and I will treat you as such. However, that also means that I expect certain things from you. While I anticipate healthy debate and discussion over the course of the semester, comments and questions must be respectful of diverse viewpoints and should be designed to advance the discussion as it relates to the class and course material. Personal attacks (i.e. those aimed at another person's appearance, demeanor, political beliefs, etc.) will not be tolerated. Likewise, repeated classroom disruptions such as interrupting each other while speaking or coming into class late and leaving early are disrespectful to the entire class. If such behavior becomes an issue, your Participation grade will be lowered.
4. **Cheating and/or plagiarism will not be tolerated.** All students are expected to be familiar with the Florida State University Academic Honor Code, which states, in part:

The academic honor system of The Florida State University is based on the premise that each student has the responsibility: (1) To uphold the highest standard of academic integrity in the student's own work; (2) To refuse to tolerate violations of academic integrity in the University community, and (3) To foster a high sense of integrity and social responsibility on the part of the University community.

I expect students to bring possible violations of this honor code to my attention. Violations of the honor code, including cheating and plagiarism will be reported to the University and otherwise dealt with at my discretion, consistent with FSU guidelines.

5. Students with disabilities needing academic accommodations must: (1) register with and provide documentation to the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC); and (2) bring a letter to the instructor from the SDRC indicating that you need academic accommodations. This must be done within the first week of class.

This syllabus and other class materials are available in alternative format upon request. For more information about services available to FSU students with disabilities, contact:

Student Disability Resource Center
874 Traditions Way
108 Student Services Building

Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL 32306-4167
(850) 644-9566 (voice)
(850) 644-8504 (TDD)
sdrc@admin.fsu.edu
<http://www.disabilitycenter.fsu.edu>

ANTICIPATED COURSE SCHEDULE AND READINGS

The syllabus may be modified as necessary to reflect the pace of class. Readings may be added or removed, but nothing affecting the grading policy will change. I will post any changes online, but you are responsible for keeping track of our progress.

Monday, August 25: Course Introduction

- No reading; class introduction and syllabus review.

Wednesday, August 27: What is our government, and what is our role?

- The Constitution;
- Roche, John P, Jr., “The Founding Fathers: A Reform Caucus in Action;”
- Federalist No. 10;
- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 1.

Monday, September 1: Labor Day – **No Class**

Wednesday, September 3: Political Culture and Ideology

- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 2.

Monday, September 8: Federalism and the Division of Power

- Federalist Nos. 46, 51
- Peterson, Paul. From *The Price of Federalism*;
- Kettl, Donald F. “Federalism: Sorting Out Who Does What.”

Wednesday, September 10: Federalism, cont’d

- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 4.

Monday, September 15: Congress

- Smith, Steven. “Congress, the Troubled Institution;”
- Stark, Steven. “*Too Representative Government.*”

Wednesday, September 17: Congress, cont'd

- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 7.

Monday, September 22: The Presidency

- Jones, Charles O. "Perspectives on the Presidency;"
- Lind, Michael. "The Out-of-Control Presidency;"
- Kernell, Samuel. From *Going Public*.

Wednesday, September 24: The Presidency, cont'd

- Current Events Quiz and Discussion;
- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 8.

Monday, September 29: - Movie, *All the President's Men*

Wednesday, October 1: - Movie, *All the President's Men*

Monday, October 6: The Judiciary

- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 10

Wednesday, October 8: The Judiciary, cont'd

- In depth analysis of U.S. Supreme Court Case – case TBD

Monday, October 13: Civil Liberties

- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 5

Wednesday, October 15: Civil Liberties, cont'd

- Sunstein, Cass. From *Republic 2.0*.

Monday, October 20: **Midterm Examination**

Wednesday, October 22:

- Current Events Quiz and Discussion

Monday, October 27: Civil Rights

- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 6.

Wednesday, October 29: Civil Rights, cont'd

- Activity TBD.

Monday, November 3: Election Presentations

- Election Paper is due today.

Wednesday, November 5: Elections

- Schudson, Michael. “America’s Ignorant Voters;”
- Blumenthal, Paul. “Super PACs and Secret Money.”

Monday, November 10: Media

- Williams, Bruce and Michael X. Delli Carpini. Selections from *After Broadcast News*.

Wednesday, November 12: Media, cont’d

- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 15.

Monday, November 17: Domestic Policy

- Lindblom, Charles E. “The Science of ‘Muddling Through;’”
- William Niskanen. “Why Our Democracy Doesn’t Work.”

Wednesday, November 19: Domestic Policy, cont’d

- Barbour and Streb, Ch. 16;
- Current Events Quiz and Discussion

Monday, November 24: Foreign Policy

- Barbour and Streb, Ch 17.

Wednesday, November 26: Thanksgiving Break – **No Class**

Monday, December 1: Foreign Policy, cont’d

- TBD

Wednesday, December 3: Catch up and Review

- Issue Paper is due today.