

# **The American Political System**

Fall 2012

Professor Linda Fowler

**Course Schedule: M-W-F 10-11:05 a.m.; X-Hr. Th 12:00-12:50 p.m.**

Office: 207 Silsby

Office Hours: W:2-3; Fr : 2-4 or by  
appointment

Phone: 646-0009 Office; 643-1321 Home

**Course Description:** Politics in the United States today pose a puzzling contradiction. On the one hand, the United States enjoys unprecedented economic and military power around the globe; on the other hand, Americans are uneasy about intractable problems that confront the nation at home and abroad. Citizens of all ideological persuasions wonder whether present patterns of citizenship and governmental decision-making will prove as adaptive and resilient as they have in the past. Have we compromised fundamental liberties too much in confronting terrorism? Will persistent inequalities across racial and income groups worsen under the pressures of globalization? Can the United States' 18<sup>th</sup> century institutions respond to the daunting economic and political challenges that confront a diverse and increasingly polarized nation?

This course provides a framework for students to form their own judgments about the current state of the American polity. Materials cover three broad topics: 1) the cultural, constitutional and historical underpinnings of the U.S. system; 2) the interactions among public officials, parties, interest groups, journalists and citizens that determine who governs; 3) the institutional arrangements of the federal government and their impact on public policy. Throughout the course, students will grapple with the enduring questions that the framers and subsequent generations of Americans have addressed: preserving liberty, while promoting equality; balancing majority and minority demands; reconciling local concerns and national interests; and engaging with other nations. In pursuing these goals, the great dilemma has always been allocating enough power to the federal government to secure the prosperity and safety of its citizens, while insuring that it remains responsive to popular control.

Students will examine historical documents and contemporary analyses of American politics to understand contemporary political debates in their theoretical and historical context. They will gain experience in writing evidenced-based, critical essays and skill in articulating their ideas in a small group setting. They will also apply what they have learned in a mock Senate to debate and to pass legislation that deals with a major policy issue. This year's bill focuses on deficits, taxes and the "taxmageddon" that will strike the U.S. economy on January 1, 2013 if Congress and the president do not act.

**Format:** My intention in the course is to promote active learning of the material rather than passive absorption of formal lectures. I will present major themes, historical perspectives, and empirical findings during the Monday and Wednesday lectures and will

engage students in a conversation about implications for contemporary policy questions during the Thursday X-hour and Friday class period. For the discussion sessions, I will divide the class, with half meeting on Thursday and half on Friday in Silsby 215. For this “Socratic” method to work, students will need to do the week’s reading and think about the questions I will circulate in advance. Be prepared for me to call on you on a regular basis, even if you have not raised your hand.

**Help:** I like to talk to students about their ideas and future plans during my office hours. I am generally around until 6 pm, if you need to see me outside of the scheduled time.

I encourage students with disabilities, including non-obvious conditions, or with personal concerns that can affect their performance on tests, papers or discussions, to talk to me outside of class so that we can make whatever accommodations might be helpful. I also encourage students to call me at home (but not after 10pm), if they are having difficulty with an assignment or a problem.

I make an effort to avoid scheduling tests and papers on religious holidays. If I overlook an important date or need to make an exception for a student whose religious beliefs require missing class, I am happy to work out a mutually satisfactory arrangement.

**Expectations:** I expect students to work independently and to observe the rules of the college honor code regarding plagiarism and cheating. I urge students to pay particular attention to the proper format for citing scholarly sources in order to avoid unintentional violations of the rules. I expect papers to be handed in at the time specified in the syllabus. For students who have multiple assignments due on the same day or experience an emergency situation, I am willing to find a mutually agreeable alternative. I don't like being approached for an extension after the fact, and I assess a penalty of one grade per day that a paper or test is late.

**Readings:** I have ordered the following books at the Wheelock Bookstore:

Bennett et al, *When the Press Fails*. 2009

Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*. 2012

Selected articles and chapters are available on the Blackboard website.

### **Grades and Requirements:**

All papers are due at the time and place listed in the syllabus. They should be double-spaced in 12-point type with standard margins. I will not read past the page limit.

Short paper. The topic draws from the readings and discussions on the fundamental debates regarding American politics. (3 pages)

Mid-term exam. The questions will test students' grasp of the readings and discussions regarding political behavior from the second section and will ask them to apply the material to the 2012 presidential election.

Final paper. The paper will examine U.S. political institutions and how they affect public policy based on material covered in the last third of the class. I expect students to connect the material to the larger issues we cover in previous sections, although the weight of the paper is on the last unit. (7 pages)

Simulation. A simulation exercise will give students experience with the bargaining and trade-offs that are an integral part of governance. Each student will have a role as a senator, representative or administration official. The class will divide into three groups--House, Senate, White House--with each group responsible for developing a proposal to deal with the looming tax crisis posed by the expiration of the Bush tax cuts, the Obama social security tax reduction and the mandatory reductions in domestic and defense spending that will occur on January 1. With the three proposals in hand, the class will attempt to pass a proposed bill that deals with the budget deficit.

Participation. I will not assign a specific grade for class participation, but will use a high level of engagement to bump up a student's letter grade and a consistent pattern of disengagement to reduce a student's letter grade. The majority of students will probably not experience an effect one way or the other.

<u>Grades:</u>	Short Paper	20 percent
	Mid-term exam	30 percent
	Final paper	40 percent
	Simulation	10 percent
	Participation	plus or minus

### **Schedule and Assignments:**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION: ENDURING DEBATES**

- M 09/10 Challenges for American Democracy
- W 09/12 Is the U.S. Exceptional?  
Schlesinger, *The Disuniting of America*, ch. 1, Blackboard  
Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, Introduction, Blackboard  
Kingdon, *America the Unusual*, ch.2, Blackboard
- Th,Fri 09/13 What Did the Framers Intend and How Do We Know?  
09/14 Discussion Sections. Read *Federalist Papers*, 10, 51 Blackboard
- M 09/17 How Democratic is the United States?  
Charles Beard, Excerpt, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*, Blackboard  
Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution*, ch. 2, 3, Blackboard  
Smith, Excerpt, *Beyond Tocqueville*, Myrdal and Hartz: *The Multiple Traditions in America*, Blackboard
- W 09/19 The Problem of Equality  
Letters of Abigail and John Adams on Women, Blackboard  
Tocqueville on equality and slavery, *Democracy in America*, Blackboard  
Mendelberg, *The Race Card*, ch. 1, Blackboard  
Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, ch. 2, Blackboard
- Th, F 09/20 Discussion--Read "\$320,000 Kindergarten Teachers," and  
Noah "Introducing the Great Divergence," Blackboard  
09/21
- M 09/24 Liberty and the Bill of Rights  
Olson, *Constitutional Law*, Excerpts on property rights, application of the Bill of Rights to the states, and the First Amendment  
Epp, "Courts and the Rights Revolution" Blackboard

W 09/26 The "People, Sir, Are a Great Beast"  
 Mueller, "Democracy and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery," Blackboard  
 Wood, "Republicanism," Blackboard  
 Tocqueville on Individualism, *Democracy in America*, Blackboard  
 Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum," Blackboard

Th, F 09/27 Discussion  
 09/28

**Sun 09/30 Paper due in my office at 5pm. Please slide it under my door.**

## II. WHO DECIDES WHO GOVERNS?

M 10/01 Citizens and Public Opinion  
 Bartels, "The Irrational Electorate," Blackboard  
 Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter*, Blackboard  
 Abramowitz, "Disappearing Center," Blackboard

W 10/03 Political Elites: Party Activists, Interest Groups and Policy Entrepreneurs  
 Baun, Cohen et al, "A Theory of Political Parties," Blackboard  
 Tocqueville on associations, *Democracy in America*, Blackboard  
 Fiorina, *Culture Wars*, Blackboard  
 Green et al, *Red State/Blue State*, Blackboard

Th, F 10/04 Discussion--Read essays by Frum, "When Did the GOP Lose Its Mind?"  
 10/05 and Chait, "When Did Liberals Become Unreasonable?"

M 10/08 The Media  
 Kull et al, "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War," Blackboard  
 Bennett et al, *When the Press Fails*, Ch. 1-3

W 10/10 Bennett et al Ch. 4-6

Th/F 10/11 Discussion--Read Cilizza, "The Political Fight on Health Care is Over:  
 10/12 The Republicans Won," Blackboard

M 10/15 Elections  
 Jacobson, "Modern Campaigns and Representation," Blackboard  
 Wayne, "Presidential Elections and American Democracy," Blackboard  
 Jacobson, "Barack Obama, the Tea Party and the 2010 Midterm  
 Elections," Blackboard

W 10/17 Do Campaigns Matter?  
 Abramowitz, "Fasten Your Seat Belts..." Blackboard  
 Campbell, Forecasting TBA, Blackboard  
 Erikson and Wiezien, "The Objective and Subjective Economy,"  
 Blackboard

**F 10/19 Midterm exam**

## III. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS--POSSIBILITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

- M 10/22 Congressional institutions  
Aldrich, *Why Parties?* Blackboard  
Rohde, "Committees and Policy Formation," Blackboard
- W 10/24 Congress in action--or not  
Mann and Ornstein, "It's Even Worse Than it Looks," Ch.1-3
- Th/F 10/25 Discussion--Finish Mann and Ornstein  
10/26
- M 10/29 The Presidency  
Federalist 70, Blackboard  
Whittington/Carpenter, "Executive Power" Blackboard  
Aberbach and Peterson, *The Executive Branch*, ch. 7, 13 (articles by Greenstein and Rudalvige), Blackboard (Don't do Milkis)
- W 10/31 The President and the Public  
Healy, *The Cult of the Presidency*, Ch. 6, Blackboard  
Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*, Ch. 2,3,8, Blackboard
- Th/Fr 11/01 Discussion--"Taxmageddon"  
11/02 Read Simpson-Bowles report on deficit reduction, Blackboard  
Read Yarrow, "Forgive us Our Debts," Blackboard
- Sat 11/03 Mock Senate on Taxes, Spending and Deficits--10am to 4pm**
- M 11/05 "The Least Dangerous Branch?"  
Olson, *Constitutional Law and Politics* (read overview, Marbury v Madison), Blackboard
- W 11/07 The Supreme Court in Action  
Hall and McGuire, *The Judicial Branch*, Ch. 2, 5 (articles by Sunstein, Whittington; (Epp (Ch. 13) was earlier), Blackboard
- Th/Fr 11/08 Discussion--Read Toobin, "Money Unlimited," Blackboard  
11/09
- M 11/12 Can American Institutions Deliver?  
Binder, "Congress, the Executive and Public Policy," Blackboard  
Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters*, Ch. 8, Blackboard
- Sat 11/17 Final Paper due, noon in my office**