

## AMERICAN POLITICS

University College  
U25 101  
Paper Assignment

Michael Nelson  
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Please prepare a 5-7 page essay on *one* of the following essay prompts. The essay is due at the beginning of class on May 7 (though you are certainly welcome to submit it earlier).

*Prompt #1: Democratic Responsiveness.* In a famous article (that we didn't read in this class), Powell argues that we can think of democratic responsiveness as a series of links in a chain:

Citizen Preferences -> Electoral Outcomes -> Institutional Rules -> Policy Outcomes

In other words, citizens' preferences affect the type of people that get elected to office (and those people's preferences). Once elected, politicians' ability to make policy is shaped by the rules of the institution in which they work. Public policy (at one end of the chain), then, can only be responsive to the preferences of citizens (at the other end of the chain) if the "links" in the chain do not distort citizens' preferences.

Is the American political system structured to be responsive to citizen preferences? Assuming that Powell's argument is correct, choose one of the "links" in the chain (the arrows above) and write an essay assessing whether or not the American political system is structured to encourage democratic responsiveness. First, explain why your chosen link is important in encouraging democratic responsiveness. Second, describe how we would know if the "link" is broken (e.g. set up a series of hypotheses). Third, assess your hypotheses with evidence from your textbook or other sources.

*Prompt #2: Candidate-Centered and Party-Centered politics.* One major theme of our class has been a shift away from party-centered politics toward a political system centered on individual politicians. Write an essay that explains this shift and assesses its consequences for American politics. First, explain the difference between candidate-centered and party-centered politics. How would we know if our politics was party-centered or candidate-centered? Second, explain how, throughout the 1900s, American politics gradually became more and more centered on political parties. Begin by explaining what role political parties played in early American politics. Then, explain how reforms in the early 1900s and the 1960s/1970s shifted American politics toward individual candidates (while you need not—and should not—detail the entire history of American politics described in your book, the political parties chapter (especially parts that weren't directly assigned) is a good place to start). Third, assess the consequences of this shift. How has a shift toward candidate-centered politics affected (a) electoral politics (voter decision-making/candidate behavior) and (b) legislative politics (legislative behavior/party leader strategies)?

### Guidelines

Please use a standard, easy-to-read 12-point font, double-spacing, and one-inch margins. Remember to cite your sources (both paraphrased and directly quoted). You can use any citation format that

you'd like, but you need to be consistent throughout your paper. Should you have questions about citations, please let me know. A good online source of information for citation is Purdue's Online Writing Lab (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>).

Late papers will be penalized according to the procedures outlined in the syllabus. Should you wish to ask for an extension, make sure that you ask (and that it is granted) at least 24 hours before the due date of the paper; extensions given at my discretion rather than as a matter of academic right.

### **How will you be graded?**

Since the final exam is not cumulative, the paper assignment is your best opportunity to put together an array of topics from the course. In other words, the paper provides you with the chance to show mastery of a variety of topics we've talked about in class and to show how well you are able to make connections between topics from the first and second halves of the class.

Of course, this invitation to "put the course together" in your paper is not license to try to connect *the entire course* in your paper. Indeed, just as I'm assessing your ability to tie things together, I'm also testing your ability to separate pertinent information from peripheral information. So, not all of the ideas, facts, and concepts that are interesting and important to our class discussions (and to your preparation for the final exam) should be included in your paper. Your job is to make selective and intelligent use of the course materials to make the strongest argument possible.

At a basic level, your job is to prove to me that you have a solid understanding of the concepts that are important to an informed understanding of your paper prompt, that you can explain those concepts clearly, and that you have put a reasonable amount of thought into your paper. Make sure that, in addition to making claims about American politics, you bolster those claims with (cited) evidence from assigned readings, lecture, and class discussion. Make sure that you present strong and fair arguments for all positions that you discuss, and do your best to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of (reasonable) alternative positions.

No paper should read as if it could just have easily been written by someone who hasn't been in our course; indeed, since this paper is due during the final exam, your job is to prove that the ideas and concepts that we've covered in this course shape the arguments that you make in your paper.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

If you get stuck, just sit down and type for ten minutes without stopping. Don't think about whether what you are writing is "good" or "bad", and don't edit what you're writing. Just type! You'll be surprised at how good the resulting pages of material are, and you'll find out what you think about the topic. From there, you'll have a great start on your paper.

Don't wait until the night before to start. There is absolutely nothing that I can say that will prevent some of you from doing this, but know that, at least on average, better grades go to papers that were

started earlier. Papers that were started earlier have the benefit of a well-rested author who has time to think carefully about the arguments that he or she is making and the opportunity to change weak arguments and bolster strong ones. Starting early also gives you the opportunity to e-mail me with questions, ideas, and concerns that may arise as you draft your papers.

Edit your papers. While I don't grade on spelling/grammar/writing style *per se*, these factors certainly color my evaluation of the paper. Of course, if your spelling/grammar/writing style obscures the point that you are trying to make, those errors will necessarily result in a lower grade because they will hinder my understanding of your argument.

Don't be afraid to use me as a resource as you draft your paper. As always, my goal is not to trick you. If you don't understand something, or if you aren't sure how a particular concept applies to your argument, feel free to contact me to set up a time to talk. My goal is that each of you submits an essay that is the best possible reflection of your understanding of our course materials.