

Power and Politics in America
POL-UA 0300
Spring 2021
Professor Sanford Clark Gordon

I. Introduction

This course provides an introduction to national political institutions and behavior in the United States, and introduces students to a variety of analytical concepts and approaches useful for the study of domestic politics. In the first part of the course, we discuss foundational normative and positive issues in U.S. politics, grounding this discussion in an in-depth examination of the political antecedents and political consequences of the 1787 Constitution. Special attention will be paid to issues of political and social equality (and inequality) and political stability (and instability). Next, we consider political participation and mass behavior: how private individuals and groups become informed about and seek to influence public policy; the nature of American political culture; the formation of public attitudes and preferences; the structure of political conflict; and the electoral connection between politicians and citizens. Finally, we examine the formal and informal institutions of governance in the United States and their implications for the creation of public policy and the maintenance or mitigation of inequality.

The goal of this course is to provide a conceptual framework in which to *comprehend*, and not merely *describe*, U.S. politics. With this in mind, we will delve into such concepts such as coordination problems, public goods, and collective action; preference aggregation and the median voter theorem; delegation, representation, and accountability; agenda control; and inter-branch bargaining. A second goal of the course is to characterize the extent to which the political system of the United States is or isn't *dysfunctional*. What systematic criteria, if any, can we use to evaluate the functioning of a political system? What are the sources of dysfunction, and can they be remedied?

II. Contact and Meeting Information

Professor

Sanford Clark Gordon

19 West 4th Street, Room 311

Office Hours: [Monday 2-4pm via Zoom](#), or by appointment

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Assistants in Instruction

Michael Becker mb4959@nyu.edu

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Lectures

Mondays and Wednesdays from 12:30-1:45pm via Zoom (accessible via the Zoom tab on NYU Classes)

III. Required Readings

The following textbook is available as an e-book:

- Theodore Lowi, Benjamin Ginsberg, Kenneth Shepsle, and Stephen Ansolabehere, *American Government: Power and Purpose*, 16th edition (“LGSA”)

Additional readings can be found on NYU Classes (CL) or online (ON).

IV. Student Responsibilities and Course Grading

Formal Course Requirements

Recitation attendance and participation: 20%

Recitations are an opportunity to discuss applications of themes related to the lectures and the weeks’ readings, and to review difficult technical concepts. You are expected to have completed all of the assigned readings up to and including those assigned for a particular recitation, and to attend all recitations. Two important notes on recitations:

1. For the first part of the semester, all recitations will meet remotely (links available via the Zoom tab on NYU Classes). After that, we will reevaluate our approach based on the incidence of COVID in New York and the NYU community, the progress of the vaccine rollout, etc., with the intention of moving to a hybrid mode if advisable.
2. NYU revised its academic calendar as part of its COVID mitigation plan. As a consequence, recitation topics will not always align with the calendar week. Please keep this in mind as you prepare for class. Recitations begin on

Thursday, February 4.

Timed, open book midterm examination 25%

The midterm examination, which covers material from the first half of the course, will be held during our regular lecture meeting time on **Monday, March 15.**

Research assignment: 20%

A brief research exercise is due by the beginning of lecture on **Monday, April 14.** The topic will be distributed in class.

Timed, open book final examination 35%

The timing of the final examination is governed by CAS, and will be announced once CAS finalizes its exam schedule. Roughly two-thirds of the exam will cover material not covered on the first exam. The remaining third will review those earlier topics.

V. Principles and Policies

The (Virtual) Classroom Environment

If you take nothing else away from this course I hope that it is the ability to apply an analytical perspective to politics in the US. This entails a rigorous commitment to logic and evidence and not a knee-jerk reliance on our own ideological predispositions (whatever they may be). Of course, politics is about disagreement and conflict concerning fundamental issues about which all of us have strong views. With that said, let us resolve as a community to treat one another at all times with dignity and respect.

Academic Integrity

All of the work you do in this course is expected to be your own. *Absolutely no cheating or plagiarism* (using someone else’s words or ideas without proper attribution) *will be tolerated.* All

ideas not your own must be properly cited. Any cases of cheating or plagiarism will be handled according to university policy. For more information on university policy, see [here](#).

Missed Exams and Late Papers

Exams: Exceptions in emergency situations are inevitable, but in general, students missing an exam will receive a grade of zero. If you must miss an exam, please contact your teaching assistant *before* the scheduled test time, and if the excuse is justified (such as in cases of documented illness, family/personal emergencies, or time zone-related challenges), we will schedule a make-up.

Research assignment: In general, students will be penalized 1/3 of a grade (e.g., from a B+ to a B) per day late. If you know you will be late, it is in your best interest to contact your teaching assistant *prior to* the deadline, since the penalty may be relaxed in extenuating circumstances.

Grading-Related Grievances

Students who feel that an error has been made in the grading of one of their assignments should first consult their teaching assistant. If the issue is not resolved, a student may submit a brief, one paragraph description of the grievance to the professor. Please keep in mind that any formal re-grading will be conducted *de novo* (i.e. without reference to the original grade), and could potentially result in a loss of points.

Religious Observance and Class Attendance

NYU is a nonsectarian institution and permits members of any religious group to absent themselves from classes without penalty when required for compliance with their religious obligations. We have taken pains not to schedule assignment deadlines or exams on major religious holidays. But please don't hesitate to bring your need for an accommodation to the attention of your teaching assistant or me.

Special Accommodations

New York University is committed to providing equal educational opportunity and participation for students with disabilities. It is the University's policy that no qualified student with a disability be excluded from participating in any University program or activity, denied the benefits of any University program or activity, or otherwise subjected to discrimination with regard to any University program or activity. Students requesting accommodations must document their disability with the [Moses Center for Students with Disabilities](#).

VI. Weekly Schedule

Part A. Foundations: Analytical, Constitutional, and Cultural

Week 1. Introduction

Monday, February 1

Introduction and Orientation

- No assigned readings

Wednesday, February 3*Some Fundamental Political Dilemmas*

- LGSA, pp. 5-22
- Bueno de Mesquita, Ethan. 2016. "The Role of Models." In *Political Economy for Public Policy*, pp. 5-7 (CL)

Recitations, Thursday, February 4 through Wednesday, February 10*Getting Comfortable with Analytical Models of Politics*

- No additional readings

Week 2. Constitutionalism and Public Authority: PreliminariesMonday, February 8*Constitutional Governance: Practical and Philosophical Foundations*

- James Madison, "Vices of the Political System of the United States," April 1787 (CL)
- The [Articles of Confederation](#) and the [original U.S. Constitution](#) (not including the Bill of Rights or subsequent amendments) (ON; also available in Appendix of LGSA)
- LGSA pp. 39-62; for a basic civics refresher if you need it, skim pp. 30-38 and 57-68

Wednesday, February 10*Republicanism and the Compound Republic*

- LGSA, pp. 74-94
- *The Federalist*, Nos. [10](#), [15](#), [39](#), and [46](#) (ON)
- Brutus (Robert Yates?), "To the Citizens of the State of New-York" (CL)

Recitations, Thursday, February 11 through Thursday, February 18

NOTE: Thursday, February 18 meets on a Monday schedule.

Do Federalism and the Separation of Powers Mediate or Undermine Democracy?

- Benner, Katie, and Jennifer Medina. "Trump Administration Sues California Over Immigration Laws." *New York Times*, March 6, 2018 (CL)
- White, Jeremy B. "[California 'sanctuary' law won't face Supreme Court review.](#)" Politico.com, June 15, 2020 (ON)
- Jordan, Miriam. "Judge Blocks 100-Day Pause on Deportation, a Blow to Biden's Immigration Agenda." *New York Times*, January 26, 2021 (CL)

Week 3. Constitutionalism, Governance, and Public Authority: Conflicts & TradeoffsMonday, February 15

PRESIDENTS' DAY – NO CLASS (BUT CLASS – AND THE MONDAY RECITATION – WILL MEET ON THURSDAY)

Wednesday, February 17*Self-Enforcing Constitutionalism: Shared Norms, Countervailing Forces, or Recipe for Stagnation?*

- LGSA, pp. 95-102
- *The Federalist*, Nos. [48](#), [49](#), and [51](#) (ON)
- Selection from Azari, Julia R., and Jennifer K. Smith. 2012. "Unwritten Rules: Informal Institutions in Established Democracies." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 10: 43-49 (CL)

Thursday, February 18*Evaluating the Constitution: A Preliminary Assessment*

- Address and Reasons of Dissent of the Minority of the Convention of Pennsylvania to their Constituents (CL)
- Dahl, Robert. 2002. *How Democratic is the American Constitution*, ch. 2 (CL)

Recitations, February 15-18

RECITATIONS CARRY OVER FROM PREVIOUS WEEK

Week 4. Political Stability and Political CultureMonday, February 22*Evaluating American Democracy in Comparative Perspective*

- Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*, ch. 1 (CL)
- Svoboda, Milan. 2019. "Polarization vs. Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 30: 20-32 (CL)

Wednesday, February 24*Political Culture*

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, selections (CL)
- Doherty, Carroll, Jocelyn Kiley, and Nida Asheer. 2019. "In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions." Pew Research Center Report, pp. 5-14 (CL)

Recitations, Monday, February 22 to Thursday, February 25*Is the Fabric of American Political Culture Fraying?*

- Cramer, Katherine. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment*, pp. 15-34 (CL)
- Koerth, Maggie, and Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux. "Our Radicalized Republic." *fivethirtyeight.com*, January 25, 2021 (ON)

Part B. Political Behavior**Week 5. Mass Attitudes and Beliefs**Monday, March 1*Attitude Formation and the Mass Public*

- LGSA, pp. 395-419 and 434-440

Wednesday, March 3*Citizen (In)Competence*

- LGSA, pp. 420-425
- Achen, Christopher, and Larry Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists*, pp. 36-40 (CL)

Recitations, Monday, March 1 to Thursday, March 4*Why is Black Partisanship Homogeneous when Black Public Opinion is Heterogeneous?*

- Johnson, Theodore R. "How the Black Vote Became a Monolith." *New York Times*, September 16, 2020 (CL)
- White, Ismail K., and Chryl N. Laird. 2020. *Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior*, ch. 3 (CL)

Week 6. Mass Behavior: Voting and CampaignsMonday, March 8*Mass Participation*

- LGSA, pp. 449-465, 475-480, 483-488

Wednesday, March 10*Campaigns and Elections: Mobilizing or Persuading?*

- LGSA, pp. 488-496
- Vavreck, Lynn. 2009. *The Message Matters*, ch. 2. (CL)

Recitations, Monday, March 8 through Thursday, March 11*How Effective are Strategies of Demobilization?*

- Cantoni, Enrico, and Vincent Pons. 2019. "Strict ID Laws Don't Stop Voters: Evidence from a U.S. Nationwide Panel, 2008-2016." *NBER Working Paper* No. 25522. (Just read the main body, tables, and figures – this paper is much shorter than it looks!) (CL)

Week 7. Midterm Exam; The MediaMonday, March 15

TIMED, OPEN BOOK MIDTERM EXAMINATION

Wednesday, March 17*The Media in American Politics*

- LGSA, pp. 608-621 ("The Media as a Political Institution")
- Guess, Andrew, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler. 2020. "Exposure to Untrustworthy Websites in the 2016 US Election." *Nature Human Behavior* 4: 472-480 (CL)

Recitations, Monday, March 15 through Thursday, March 18*Recitations will not be held in Week 7***Week 8. Parties, Partisanship, and Polarization**Monday, March 22*The Structure of Party Competition*

- LGSA, pp. 470-472, 481-483, 510-526, 528-538, and skim 543-559

Wednesday, March 24*On the Origins and Consequences of Partisan Polarization*

- McCarty, Nolan. 2019. *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, ch. 5 (CL)
- Fiorina, Morris P. 2019. "The Political Parties Have Sorted" (CL)
- Azari, Julia. "[Weak Parties and Strong Partisanship are a Bad Combination](#)." *Vox.com*, November 3, 2016 (ON)

Recitations, Monday March 22 through Thursday, March 25*What are the Political and Policy Consequences of Partisan Polarization?*

- Hall, Andrew. 2015. "What Happens When Extremists win Primaries?" *American Political Science Review* 109(1), 18-42. Just read pp. 18-25 (CL)
- McCarty, Nolan. 2019. *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, ch. 7 (CL)

Part C. The Institutions of Governance

Week 9. Electoral Competition and the Nature of Congressional Representation

Monday, March 29

On the Nature of Representation

- *The Federalist*, Nos. 62 and 63 (ON)
- LGSA, pp. 197-212
- Lapowsky, Issie. February 20, 2018. “[The Geeks Who Put a Stop to Pennsylvania’s Partisan Gerrymandering](#).” *Wired* (ON)

Wednesday, March 31

Legislative Preferences and Legislative Agenda Control

- LGSA, pp. 240-249
- Lee, Frances. 2016. *Insecure Majorities*, selections from chs. 2 and 3 (CL)

Recitations, Monday, March 29 through Thursday, April 1

What Explains the Gender Gap in Congressional Candidate Recruitment?

- Lawless, Jennifer L. 2015. “Female Candidates and Legislators.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 18:349-366 (CL)

Week 10. Congress, Continued; Executive Authority

Monday, April 5

Legislative Organization and Interbranch Bargaining

- LGSA, pp. 213-230, skim 231-239
- Krehbiel, Keith. 1998. *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*, pp. 20-39 (CL)

Wednesday, April 7

Sources of Executive Authority

- LGSA, pp. 259-276
- Neustadt, Richard. 1960. *Presidential Power*, pp. 29-49 (CL)

Recitations, Monday, April 5 through Thursday, April 8

Who’s Pivotal in Congress, and Why Does it Matter?

- Binder, Sarah. “McConnell and Schumer ended their standoff over the new Senate. Who won and what happened?” *The Monkey Cage (Washington Post Blog)*, January 26, 2021 (CL)
- McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole, Thomas Romer, and Howard Rosenthal. “[The Price of Principle](#).” *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2011. (ON)

Week 11. The Presidency and the Bureaucracy

Monday, April 12

The Institutional Presidency

- LGSA, pp. 277-300

Wednesday, April 14

BRIEF RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT DUE

Bureaucracy and the Politics of Implementation

- LGSA, pp. 306-335
- Wilson, James Q. 1989. *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*, pp. 154-171 (CL)

Recitations, Monday, April 12 through Thursday, April 15

Was Donald Trump a Powerful President?

- Glassman, Matt. December 27, 2017. “[Donald Trump is a Dangerously Weak President.](#)” *vox.com*; and April 25, 2018. “[How Congressional Republicans Have Neutered the Trump Agenda.](#)” *National Review* (ON)

Week 12. Organized Interests

Monday, April 19

CLASS WILL NOT MEET

Wednesday, April 21

The Mechanisms of Private Influence

- LGSA, ch. 13

Recitations, Tuesday, April 20 through Monday, April 26

Should We Restrict Money in Elections?

- *Congressional Quarterly* synopsis of *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) (CL)
- Biersack, Bob. February 7, 2018. “[8 Years Later: How Citizens United Changed Campaign Finance.](#)” *opensecrets.org* (ON)
- Castleton, Scott. May 7, 2018. “[It’s Time for Liberals to Get Over Citizens United.](#)” *vox.com* (ON)

Week 13. The Judiciary and the Regulation of State-Citizen Relations

Monday, April 26

The Least Dangerous Branch?

- LGSA, pp. 360-389 (for factual background skim pp. 348-359)
- *The Federalist*, No. 78 (ON)
- *Marbury v. Madison* (CL)

Wednesday, April 28

The Citizen and the State

- LGSA, ch. 4

Recitations, Tuesday, April 27 through Monday, May 3

What Should Judges Do?

- Breyer, Stephen. 2006. *Active Liberty*, selections (CL)
- Scalia, Antonin. 1997. *A Matter of Interpretation*, selections (CL)
- *Congressional Quarterly* synopses of *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) (CL)

Week 14. Inequalities

Monday, May 3

Inequalities I

- *Congressional Quarterly* synopsis of *Shelby County v. Holder* (CL)
- LGSA, ch. 5

Wednesday, May 5

Inequalities II

- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2010. *Winner-Take-All Politics*, selections (CL)

Recitations, Tuesday, May 4 through Monday, May 10

The Politics of Policing

- United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division. 2015. “[Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department](#).” Washington, DC: USDOJ. Read the report summary (ON)
- Summers, Juana. “[Most U.S. Mayors Do Not Support Reallocating Police Resources, Survey Finds](#).” npr.org, January 27, 2021 (ON)

Week 15. Wrapping Up

Monday, May 10

Review and Conclusion

TBD

TIMED, OPEN BOOK FINAL EXAMINATION