

Introduction to American Government and Politics

COLBY COLLEGE
GOVERNMENT 111
Spring 2020

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Office: Diamond Hall 259

Office Hours: Tuesdays/Wednesdays, 11:00-1:00

Tuesdays and Thursdays

Olin Hall 001

9:30 – 10:45 a.m.

Overview and Aims

This course surveys the fundamentals of American government and politics. It emphasizes constitutional development and political science's role in evaluating institutional and cultural change since the writing of the U.S. Constitution in 1787. This course presents both historical and contemporary works of political science in order to facilitate students' understanding of American politics. In short, this course asks two basic questions, how does government work in the United States, and, can it be made to work better? In answering both questions, students will focus on the method of political science in order to expand their understanding of political phenomena and behavior. We will tie those empirical considerations of institutional and political behavior to a discussion of competing political values, principles, and traditions in America's political development.

By the end of this course students will be able to speak and write about political issues that are central to the American political system; describe and evaluate institutional changes to that system, which have taken place since the Constitution's adoption; assess and debate contemporary reform proposals to those constitutional institutions; and discuss the philosophical and theoretical arguments that undergird the practice of contemporary American politics.

Course Requirements and Grade Distribution

Note: To pass this course, students must complete or submit all of the following:

- Attendance and Participation	5%
- Weekly Reading Quizzes	10%
- Group Debate	20%
- Post-Debate Paper	20%
- Midterm Exam (March 19 th)	20%
- Final Exam (May 14 th)	25%

There are six components to the final grade:

Attendance and Participation: I do not lecture, and it is not possible to make up work from class by getting notes, or seeing me in office hours. Our weekly meetings are an opportunity for us to discuss the essential questions or difficulties related to each week's set of readings. This requires you to be in class. Generally, we will spend the class on Tuesday addressing concerns from the readings and problematizing the week's main issues. Our Thursday meetings will be dedicated to one of nine group debates, and to further discussion of the week's readings. Please ensure that by Tuesday of each week, to have completed the week's readings and to have reviewed the questions listed in the syllabus.

Consider “participation” broadly. Coming to each class and raising a question or two at the beginning is the easiest way to start a discussion and earn credit for your active participation. I expect that most of this material is new to you, and for many of the texts there are different ways of interpreting the argument. Of course, there are many readings which you might actually disagree with and if so, we all benefit by hearing your criticism. In sum, showing up having read the material is probably not sufficient for most students; write down your questions, concerns, or points as you read. Prepare to talk.

Attendance and participation at all class meetings is required. Of course, we all get ill from time-to-time or have intervening schedule conflicts. An absence or two will not count against you; just come to the next class fully prepared to participate. If there is a major conflict, I want to know so that I can help you make-up work and succeed in this course.

Weekly Reading Quizzes: In purchasing your textbook, you received access to a set of on-line resources to accompany each chapter. Before Tuesday's class, you will be required to complete the "InQuizitive" reading assessment for the assigned textbook chapter. You may complete the quiz as many times as you would like until you are satisfied with the grade. The grade you have in the system as of the start of Tuesday's class is the grade I will enter into my gradebook; you will not be able to boost your grade for credit after that point. The goal is three-fold. First, it provides a strong incentive for every student to complete the readings for understanding, permitting us to spend our time in class discussing issues, rather than relaying facts. Second, it offers an excellent resource for you to check your own comprehension, especially as the midterm and final exam approaches. Finally, it allows me to identify problem-areas, permitting me to use our limited time to address concepts where there are large misconceptions or widespread confusion.

These are low-stakes reading quizzes. The assignments are open-book, but you must complete them individually. Collaboration is strictly prohibited. You can access each of the reading quizzes by [clicking here](#) and registering your purchase. You will need to join our course using the following ID: **214876**. There is a helpful set of [support links available through Norton](#), but please let me know if you have any trouble getting started.

Examinations: All students will sit for a midterm and final examination. The midterm will be in-class on March 19th. Per the College Registrar the final exam is scheduled for Tuesday, May 14th between 1:30 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. Both exams will be closed-book, timed, and subject to the Colby Affirmation. For both exams, I will give you a list of possible essay questions. On the day of the exam, I will choose the questions on which you will write.

Group Debate: Each student will select one of the topics identified in the lecture schedule and develop an argument in response to the debate question. Students will work collectively, in groups no larger than three per side of the debate. I will randomly assign the specific positions on the questions listed in the syllabus.

On the day of the debate, the presentations will be structured as follows. The affirmative side will give their opening remarks, then the opposing side will deliver their opening remarks. Opening statements should introduce the idea, the main justification for the position, and should be between 6-8 minutes. After the opening remarks, the affirmative side will have up to 5-

minutes to respond without interruption to points raised, or by raising a new point. The opposing side follows. This back-and-forth will proceed until all members of each side have spoken. Then, beginning with the opposing side, each side may ask the other team up to three questions, going in turn. The audience is then given the opportunity to ask questions of either side. Each side will then be allotted 5 minutes for a prepared conclusion. Prepared, written remarks are highly encouraged throughout the debate. Groups may use graphic aids to help demonstrate their point.

Post-Debate Paper: Each student will write an 6-8 page paper on the debate topic they selected. This assignment is an opportunity for you to demonstrate a firm command of a wide range of reading and lecture material, and apply your knowledge in making an argument about American politics. Students may incorporate any material used in preparation for the debate in writing this paper. Students do not need to maintain the same position or argument. Students should use the instructor's comments, the opposition's counter-argument, and their peers' questions to construct a more robust argument. This paper should draw heavily on empirical social science, and should conform to our discipline's standards for citations; a minimum of five peer-reviewed sources is necessary. Those sources should be appropriately cited in a reference page, which does not count against the minimum/maximum listed above.

All essays, regardless of topic, should extensively draw on arguments, ideas, and terms we have discussed in class and during the debate. Make sure that the argument you present is your own and that it does not simply restate, but builds off of, positions that you have read. In sum, this assignment is an opportunity for you to demonstrate a firm command of the course material, and apply your knowledge in making an argument about American politics.

The paper is due two weeks after your debate performance by 11:59 p.m. You must submit your assignment via email. I do not accept late papers. But, if you need an extension on a paper, for any reason, just ask. You do not even need to tell me the reason. Requests for extensions on papers must be received in writing, by email at least one week prior to the deadline.

Readings

This course will rely on secondary readings, contemporary articles, and other primary documents related to our studies of American government. There is also one textbook available for purchase at the bookstore. An electronic version suffices for this class.

Stephen Ansolabehere, Benjamin Ginsberg, Theodore Lowi, Kenneth Shepsle. 2019.
American Government, Brief Fifteenth Edition. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company.
[ISBN: 978-0-393-67493-4](https://www.wwnorton.com/9780393674934)

All other readings are posted online for you to download. Additional readings and questions may be posted as the course proceeds. *NB: The syllabus available online and available for download is "clickable" and will direct you to PDF copies of each week's ancillary readings.*

Other Policies

Grading: Questions and concerns about a grade do arise. If this is the case, feel free to contact me. We will schedule an appointment to meet in person that is convenient for both of us. I will ask you to bring the original assignment as well as a typed explanation as to why your

assignment should have received a better grade. I do this only to ensure that our conversation will be productive. My obligation back to you is that I will provide an exemplar assignment, which you can reference and consider.

The Faculty at Colby College has agreed to use the following scale in assessing student performance. More information about these standards is [available here](#).

A -- Excellent work in meeting the goals of the course, in mastering the course material, in critical analysis, in written and oral communication, or in other forms of creative expression, within the context of the course expectations. (The grade of A+ is awarded only in very rare instances when a student exceeds the highest reasonable expectations for undergraduates.)

B -- Very Good to Good work in meeting the goals of the course, in mastering the course material, in critical analysis, in written and oral communication, or in other forms of creative expression, within the context of the course expectations.

C -- Satisfactory work in meeting the goals of the course, in mastering the course material, in critical analysis, in written and oral communication, or in other forms of creative expression, within the context of the course expectations.

D -- Minimally acceptable work in meeting the goals of the course, in mastering the course material, in critical analysis, in written and oral communication, or in other forms of creative expression, within the context of the course expectations.

F -- Seriously deficient work that is not acceptable. No credit is awarded. F may also indicate abandonment of a course without formal withdrawal.

Academic Honesty: You are assumed to be familiar with the university's policies on cheating and plagiarism, and the potential penalties: <http://www.colby.edu/academicintegrity/>. If, in the course of writing an assignment, you have any questions about whether you have violated an academic integrity standard just ask; there is no penalty for being cautious.

Your Well-Being: If you or someone you know is struggling with gender, sexual, domestic, or other forms of power-based personal violence, there are many resources available through the *Office of the Dean of Students*: 207-859-4250.

As your instructor, and as a person, know that I care about you and your well-being and stand ready to provide support and resources as I can. As your instructor, I am a responsible employee, which means that I am required by College policy and federal law to report what you tell me about power-based personal violence to the University's Title IX Coordinator, who will ensure that you receive the resources and support you need, while also reviewing the information presented to determine whether further action is necessary to ensure survivor safety and the safety of the University community. More generally, if you are facing any other problem that affects your performance in class, informing me immediately can help us resolve potential problems before they interfere with your work. In addition, you should contact your Class Dean, who can help you balance your work and whatever issues you may face throughout the semester.

Reading Schedule and Concept Outline

Week of February 6th

American Government and Political Science
First Class Meeting Thursday, February 6th

Discussion: Is there a different way to discuss and think about politics?

American Government, "Chapter 1: Introduction: Governance and Representation"
[Jonathan Rauch, "How American Politics Went Insane"](#)

Questions

- 1) How do political scientists think about elections differently than pundits, talking heads, journalists, and those around the dining room table?
- 2) What role do *rules, procedures, values, and institutions* serve in creating the political outcomes discussed in news about elections and governance?
- 3) What alternatives are there to our current election system?

Week of February 11th

The American People and the Concept of "Founding"

Discussion: Is American politics guided by foundational principles?

American Government, "Chapter 2: The Founding and the Constitution"
[Federalist Nos. 10 and 51](#)
[Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison \(1789/1790\)](#)

Questions:

- 1) How well has the American experiment lived up to the ends and objectives of the American regime as described in the Declaration of Independence?
- 2) What type of political community did the Articles of Confederation envision? What were its advantages?
- 3) How would you describe the American regime? Even though it does not seek to instill virtue directly, is it indifferent to virtue or citizenship? Can it afford to be?
- 4) Is the Constitution optimistic or pessimistic about human nature? In other words, how much of our system is predicated on the idea that we are selfish, individualistic political animals?
- 5) Is it a good idea to rewrite the Constitution every 19 or 20 years as Thomas Jefferson suggested? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 6) How did the Founders' view of politics and society differ from the Anti-Federalists? How did these views translate into the institutions and procedures of the 1787 Constitution?

Week of February 18th

The U.S. Constitution and Federalism

Discussion: Is federalism just for racists?

Group Debate: Should more power be given to the states to reform immigration?

American Government, "Chapter 3: Federalism and the Separation of Powers"

[Andy Smarick, "Toward Real Decentralization"](#)

- 1) Did the Constitution, although it formally codified a federal system, presuppose a centralized government that would destroy the independence of the State governments? Why did the Anti-Federalists champion state and local governments? In other words, did the Anti-Federalists get it right?
- 2) Are state and local governments still relevant to American political life in the 21st Century? In other words, should we keep them around?
- 3) Are states and localities better suited to create and implement some policies like education, policing, and/or transportation? What are the disadvantages of decentralized administration?
- 4) What values does federalism promote? What values does it conflict with? Is there a way to reconcile these?
- 5) Why are so many policies, once left to the states now handled by the federal government, in full, or in-part? Was such a transformation inevitable?

Week of February 25th

Civil Liberties and Civil Rights

Discussion: Is there a way to simultaneously achieve liberty, equality, *and* inclusion?

Group Debate: Should there be a religious exemption to nondiscrimination laws?

American Government, "Chapter 4: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights"

[Thomas Healy, "Who's Afraid of Free Speech," *The Atlantic*](#)

Questions:

- 1) In Federalist 10, James Madison wrote that, "So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts." Does this describe social movement politics?
- 2) Is there a common frame or impulse connecting social movements? Is the Constitution fundamentally against those types of values, if it routinely encourages popular protest?
- 3) Are there dangers in pursuing civil rights or civil liberties through the judiciary, or is that what the courts are there for?
- 4) If we value civil liberties so highly, why does the U.S. have the world's highest rate of criminal incarceration?
- 5) Have millennials forsaken free speech?

Week of March 3rd

Public Opinion and the Media

Discussion: Is there such thing as public opinion in a mass democracy?

Group Debate: Should government force Facebook (social media) to take down ads that "lie?"

American Government, "Chapter 9: Public Opinion and the Media"

[Gallup, "Public Opinion in a Democracy"](#)

Questions:

- 1) How much do citizens need to know about government and politics in order to play a meaningful role? Does it matter for the health of our representational system that most of the time, only 1 in 2 Americans knows that there are two U.S. Senators from each state, or could name their representative to Congress?
- 2) Has social media and increased interconnectivity among the public and between political officials made the national government more responsive to the needs of the American citizenry?
- 3) How would we be able to determine whether the news was biased? In what other ways beyond liberal and conservative could news be biased? Can news ever be unbiased?
- 4) Should the government take an active role (subsidizing, public ownership, ownership caps, etc.) in ensuring that the news media provide substantive, unbiased coverage of politics?
- 5) Has the advent of scientific polling helped politicians decipher public opinion better or has it made public opinion more malleable and prone to elite interpretations?

Week of March 10th

Political Participation, Voting, and Elections

Discussion: Do we have a system that ensures "one man, one vote?"

Group Debate: Should we replace the Electoral College with a nation-wide plurality vote?

American Government, "Chapter 10: Elections"

[Jonathan Samples, "Money and Speech," *The Fallacy of Campaign Finance Reform*](#)

Questions:

- 1) In the 19th Century, less than half of adults were entitled to vote, but about 80 percent did. Today, virtually all adults are entitled to vote, but only about half do. Which one of these two eras is the "healthier democracy"?
- 2) Should government take an active role in ensuring that citizens vote, or is this a role for civil society (churches, civic groups, parties)?
- 3) If elections are won with votes, and every person gets only one vote, should it matter if organizations like political parties or Super PACs get to spend unlimited amounts of money?
- 4) Is it possible to create a campaign finance system that does not advantage either the incumbent or the challenger?

- 5) Given the importance of political parties to the electoral system, should state and national laws regulate how they operate, or should the party be free to choose its own rules and procedures?

Week of March 17th

Interest Groups

NB: Reading Load is Lessened to Help Accommodate Midterm Examination

Discussion: Is American government rigged to protect vested interests?

American Government, "Chapter 12: Groups and Interests"

- 1) Do interest groups encourage or interfere with representative democracy?
- 2) Should there be rules that prevent elected officials from lobbying their former colleagues after they leave office?
- 3) To what extent has government been successful in limiting the roll of organized interests in American elections?

***** MIDTERM EXAMINATION: THURSDAY, MARCH 19th *****

Week of March 31st

Political Parties

Discussion: Is there a flaw in the American Constitution that parties can fix?

Group Debate: Should we adopt a proportional party system for Congressional state delegations?

American Government, "Chapter 11: Political Parties"

[James Ceaser, "The Presidential Nomination Mess"](#)

[Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort* \(selection\)](#)

Questions:

- 1) Are political parties necessary for our Constitution to work? In what ways do parties facilitate the design of 1787 Constitution? Does it undermine any provisions?
- 2) Given how polarized our politics seems to be, would American democracy be better served if there were no parties?
- 3) Are interest groups or political parties the best vehicle for representing citizen opinion to government?
- 4) Is the system "rigged" against third parties?

Week of April 7th

The Congress

Discussion: Is Congress Relevant Anymore?

Group Debate: Should Members of Congress have term limits?

American Government, "Chapter 5: Congress: The First Branch"

[Federalist Nos. 55 and 62](#)

[Evan Bayh, “Why I’m Leaving the Senate”](#)

Questions:

- 1) Which model of representation, trustee or delegate, best defines the relationship between members of Congress and their constituents today?
- 2) Are committees an efficient or inefficient way of structuring Congress, given how many members there are, but also given that so few bills come out of committee?
- 3) Is Congress too dependent on interest groups in gathering information and creating legislation?
- 4) If members of Congress are too busy raising money and running for re-election, how might we incentive them to stay in Washington, D.C. and write laws?
- 5) Is it possible for the Congress to reassert authority over the president and the bureaucracy? What provisions in the Constitution would support the institution’s resurgence?

Week of April 14th

The Presidency

Discussion: Is the Presidency Imperial?

Group Debate: Should the president have “fast track” authority for domestic policy bills?

American Government, "Chapter 6: The Presidency"

[William G. Howell and Terry Moe, “Congress and the Pathologies of American Government,”](#)

Relic: How Our Constitution Undermines Effective Government

[Abraham Lincoln, “Letter to Albert Hodges, 4 April, 1864”](#)

Questions:

- 1) Are there circumstances under which presidents *should* violate the Constitution, defy a court’s rulings, or disobey an act of Congress – in other words, “break the law”?
- 2) Does Article II of the U.S. Constitution restrict the presidency as much as it empowers the office?
- 3) The Electoral College is the fourth institution created in the U.S. Constitution, yet many perceive it to be an outdated relic of the Framers’ fear of democracy. Is there any advantage to keeping this institution, even in its greatly modified form?
- 4) What makes a president great? Does a great president ensure a great government?
- 5) The Congress has not declared war since 1941; do presidents have too much authority to engage in foreign conflicts without Congressional approval?

Week of April 21st

The Bureaucracy

Discussion: Is the administrative State compatible with constitutional government?

Group Debate: Should government functions be outsourced to private contractors?

American Government, "Chapter 7: The Executive Branch"

[Shep Melnick, “The Strange Evolution of Title IX”](#)

[Adam White, "Break the Bureaucracy!"](#)

Questions:

- 1) Given how large, administrative, and technocratic our government has become, what attributes are necessary for public leadership in the 21st Century?
- 2) Does the idea of American democracy suggest a large public sector or a small public sector? In other words, does a large bureaucracy increase or decrease freedom and opportunity?
- 3) In 1887, Woodrow Wilson wrote, “The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics; it at most points stands apart even from the debatable ground of constitutional study. It is a part of political life only as the methods of the counting house are a part of the life of society; only as machinery is part of the manufactured product.” Is this an accurate portrayal of how bureaucrats behave in our political system?
- 4) Could a bureaucracy ever be as flexible, dynamic, or as innovative as a large corporation?

Week of April 28th

The Judiciary

*NB: Thursday's Class and Debate will be Held on
Friday, May 1st to Accommodate CLAS 2020*

Discussion: What is the proper role of a judge?

Group Debate: Should U.S. Federal judges serve for life?

American Government, "Chapter 8: The Federal Courts"

[Martha Derthick, “Preserving Federalism: Congress, the States, and the Supreme Court”](#)

[Obergefell v. Hodges \(2014\) – Scalia’s Dissent](#)

Questions:

- 1) Does the fact that federal judges have lifetime appointments make them better servants of our democracy or are they too removed from the public and democratic pressures?
- 2) Should nine unelected justices have the authority to nullify state and national laws enacted by elected representatives?
- 3) Judicial restraint, judicial activism, or just plain opportunism – how should we think about how justices make decisions? How should they consider the facts before the bench?
- 4) We hear a lot about 5-4, contentious decisions on the court, but in the last 10 years, Chief Justice Roberts has overseen more unanimous decisions than any other Chief Justice. Can the Court escape partisan politics, or is it just as political an institution as the other branches of government?
- 5) In 1943, Justice Frankfurter called for a renewed sense of “judicial humility;” how would American history and politics be different if the courts more frequently exercised judicial restraint by deferring to legislatures and majority rule more often?

Week of May 5th

Domestic Policy Making

Discussion: How much political change can we expect at any one time? How much should we want?

American Government, "Chapter 13: Economic and Social Policy"

[Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* \(Ted Talk\)](#)

[George Will, "How Income Inequality Benefits Everybody"](#)

[A. Barton Hinkle, "How to Fix the Economy, and Income Inequality"](#)

Questions:

- 1) Does our Constitutional system make it easier for policies to become “entrenched”?
- 2) In 1960, E.E. Schattschneider wrote that, “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.” How do inequities manifest in the current policy making process?
- 3) Why has the government taken on a greater role in managing the economy over the course of American political history?
- 4) Should the government be able to mandate certain economic behaviors (e.g., buy medical insurance)? What assumptions underlie those types of economic interventions?
- 5) Given what you know about the average American voter, is policy best left to experts and technocrats, or to more democratic procedures?

***** FINAL EXAM, THURSDAY, May 14th, FROM 1:30 p.m. TO 4:30 p.m. *****