American Politics
Politics 210-02

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Purpose: This course examines the nature of American politics, its structure and philosophical underpinnings, through an inquiry into the question: How democratic is the United States?

Student Learning Objectives
Students will be able to—
- Identify the sources and structures of political power in the U.S.
- Evaluate how well governmental institutions, practices, and processes measure up to normative concerns and constitutional theories;
- Analyze the efficacy and desirability of alternative arrangements or reforms

Course Materials:
Bryan Stevenson, Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption. (Spiegal and Grau, 2014)

Additional class readings are found on the WISE site for Poli-210-02. Please print and bring your reading to class. If you prefer not to print, make sure you are able to access the reading during class along with your notes on that reading. Further, make a habit of reading the domestic politics stories in a national newspaper—either The New York Times which is provided free to Willamette students or the Washington Post for which you can get a free online subscription.

Course Requirements:
1st Exam  
2nd Exam  
Final Exam  
Class Participation, Quizzes, Short assignments

A note about class participation and quizzes: This class is 90-minutes long. That is too long for me to be able to lecture effectively even if I wanted to. I use a variety of teaching methods because I know that one size does not fit all, that students have different learning styles with a variety of strengths and weaknesses. The reading material is difficult—why else come to college?—and so we will use the class time to help enhance your understanding of the readings and to develop your own ideas about the meanings of various arguments, political structures and expressions of power. While lecturing is a component of this course, I expect you to come to class ready to engage the material, me and your peers. You cannot do this if you do not come to class in the first place and you cannot do this well if you do not read the assigned material for the class. I use the quizzes as a diagnostic tool and also because there is actually good data about the use of quizzes for learning. If you find yourself struggling with the reading or the quizzes, let me know—come see me in office hours or shoot me an email.

Willamette's Credit Hour Policy: For every hour of class time, there is an expectation of 2-3 hours work outside of class. Thus, for a class meeting three hours a week you should anticipate spending 6-9 hours outside of class engaged in course-related activities. I have designed readings and assignments with this credit hour requirement in mind and you should plan accordingly.
Respect for Diversity: In pursuit of the goal of academic excellence, I seek to develop and nurture diversity, believing that it strengthens classroom engagement, stimulates creativity, promotes the exchange of ideas, and enriches campus life. I do not condone discrimination against any member of the school’s community on the basis of race, religion, color, sex, age, national origin or ancestry, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability status, health status, or veteran status. I welcome your ideas and suggestions about how to ensure the creation of such an inclusive learning community. Please note that when given advance warning, I make accommodations for religious needs and practices.

Religious Holidays: Willamette University recognizes the value of religious practice and strives to accommodate students’ commitment to their religious traditions whenever possible. When conflicts between holy days or other religious practice and academic scheduling arise, every effort should be made to allow students to adhere to their tradition, including, when possible, excusing class absences and allowing make-up work. A student anticipating the need to miss a class for religious reasons should alert the faculty member within the first two weeks of the semester, and the two of them should determine the next course of action. Any unresolved difficulty should be referred to the Office of the Chaplains.

Students with Disabilities: In accordance with University policy, if you have a documented disability and require accommodations to obtain equal access to this class, please contact me at the beginning of the semester or when given an assignment for which an accommodation is required. Students must verify their eligibility though the Office of Student Disability Services in the Bishop Wellness Center. If you have any questions about this, please feel free to contact me. I will respect any accommodation authorized by the Office of Disabilities Services.

Cheating and Plagiarism: Representing someone else’s work as your own and other forms of cheating will result in a zero for that assignment and may result in failure of the course. See http://www.willamette.edu/cla/dean/policies/plagiarism.html for university policies. When you quote from a source, you must place that material in quotation marks and correctly cite the source of the quotation. When you paraphrase the words of another you must provide the source from which you are paraphrasing. If you are ever unsure if some action constitutes cheating or plagiarism, ask me. Ignorance of the rules is not an acceptable defense.

1/19 (Tues) Introduction: What do you want to know about American Politics?

Note on Celebrating the Life of MLK: There are events all week and next around campus. See http://www.willamette.edu/dept/oma/mlk/ for the full schedule. You might especially note the MLK Lecture by Leonard Pitts Jr. on Friday, January 22, at 7pm at Hudson Hall. Extra credit for any student who attends the lecture and writes a one-page reflection, due by Thursday, Jan 28.

Does our criminal justice system deliver justice?

1/21 (TH) False conviction in small town Alabama
Stevenson, Chapters 1-5

1/26 (Tues) Why are our incarceration rates so high?
Stevenson, Chapters 6-13

1/28 (Th) Is there hope? What kinds of reforms could be possible? What would it take to bring about changes in this system?
Stevenson, Chapters 14—Epilogue
Is the U.S. a democracy?

2/2 (Tues) Voting Rights: What are the protections for voting rights and their restrictions? What is the status of the Voting Rights Act in securing those rights?  
Read only the majority opinion of *Shelby Co v. Holder* (2012) found on WISE.

2/4 (Thurs) Ginsberg’s dissent, which begins on page 32 of the Shelby Co. v. Holder pdf on WISE.

Registrar Announcement: Last day to file Add/Drop is January 29th. Please make sure you have filled out and turned in appropriate paperwork.

2/9 (Tues) 15th Amendment: What was the original intent of the 15th Amendment? How did it change our Constitution and how have our politics evolved since then?  
“Brief of the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law as Amicus Curiae in Support of Respondents,”  
*Shelby Co. v. Holder* [on WISE]

2/11 (Thurs) No class. Short assignment distributed.

2/16 (Tues) Should people have so much respect for the Constitution? How democratic is it?  
Dahl, Chapters 1-2 and Appendix A.

2/18 (Thurs) Why the Electoral College? Does the popular vote matter? How does our structure differ from other countries?  
Dahl, Chapters 3-4.

2/23 (Tues) The Presidential primary system and campaign funding: What is the nomination process for President? How are campaigns funded? How can independents be restricted from voting in primaries? Do campaigns even matter?  
No reading but do bring any review questions you have.

2/25 (Thurs) 1st Exam

Is Congress broken?

3/1 (Tues) R. Shep Melnick, “Does the Constitution Encourage Gridlock?” talk delivered at Willamette University, Spring 2011 [found on WISE]

3/3 (Thurs) Why is it so hard for the 2 parties to agree? Why is the gap between the 2 parties growing?  

3/8 (Tues) How did the 2 parties form? Is there hope for getting the 2 parties to cooperate more?  
Mann and Ornstein, Chapter 3: Beyond the Debt Ceiling Disaster [on WISE]

3/10 (Thurs) How well does the system perform compared to other countries?  
Dahl, Chapter 5
3/15 (Tues) Why are people so obsessed with the Constitution?  
   Dahl, Chapters 6

3/17 (Thurs) What changes are possible? What can be done about gerrymandering?  
   Dahl, Chapter 7-8

March 22-24—No class; Spring Break

Legislative Case Study: health care reform

3/29 (Tues) Why are bills so complicated?  
   Case Study: Health Care Reform  
   “Summary of the New Health Reform Law” Kaiser Family Foundation [on WISE]  
   “The Uninsured and the Difference Health Insurance Makes” Kaiser Family Foundation [on WISE]

3/31 (Thurs) How does legislation get created?  
   Jacob Hacker, “The Road to Somewhere: Why Health Reform Happened or Why Political Scientists who  
   Write about Public Policy Shouldn’t Assume They Know How to Shape It” Perspectives on Politics 8  
   (September 2010) 3: 861-876. [on WISE]

Registrar Announcement: April 1st is the last day to withdraw.

4/5 (Tues) Challenges to health care reform from courts and states. How does the executive branch respond to  
   these challenges? What happens to health care reform if Rs control the Presidency?  
   Reading: TBA

4/7 (Thurs) Religious freedom, reproductive rights and health care.  
   Reading: TBA

4/12 (Tues) 2nd Exam

Wither the citizenry?

4/14 (Thurs) How much does the public ignore?  
   Larry Bartels, “Homer Gets a Tax Cut: Inequality and Public Policy in the American Mind” Perspectives on  

4/19 (Tues) How much does the public know? How much does it need to know?  
   Martin Gilens, Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America (Russell Sage  
   Foundation, 2012): Chapter 1: Citizen Competence [on WISE]

4/20 (WED) STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP RECOGNITION DAY: Extra credit for a one-page write-up about one panel you  
   attended this day. Due: Thursday, April 24th.

4/21 (Thurs) What is the role of the media in informing or misinforming the public?  
   Peter Dreier and Christopher Martin, “How ACORN was framed: Political Controversy and Media Agenda  
   Setting” Perspectives on Politics 8 (September 2010) 3: 761-792.
Reforming the System

4/26 (Tues) Please bring one article about a reform measure you find interesting and you believe can make a difference in how American politics operates. Everyone will be assigned a specific topic to address, e.g.: money in politics; gerrymandering; racial inequality; political party reform; etc.

4/28 (Thurs) Reform debate

5/3 (Tues) Conclusions and Review

**Final Exam:** Tuesday, May 10th from 2-5pm. Note that this date and time is set by the University registrar. Accommodations for an alternative time can only be made under extraordinary circumstances. Please plan accordingly.