

### What's the Matter with American Politics?

I hope that this class will be unlike any other you have taken at Willamette University, more like a book group than a conventional course. Most courses, even discussion-centered ones, revolve around the professor. In this class, in contrast, the discussion will be a responsibility of everyone—not just in an assigned class session but in every class session. To facilitate lively and focused discussions and to ensure adequate preparation for each class period, you will submit discussion questions and reading summaries/analyses at several points during the week leading up to the class meeting. And to make it feel more like a book group, I propose that we meet, as much as possible, in different student residences, rather than in the same classroom week after week.

Each of the books that I have selected were published this year or last and are, in different ways, engaged with answering the question of what's the matter with contemporary American politics. The books in the first half of the course are focused largely on the current polarized conflict over public policy, particularly regarding spending and taxes, inequality and government power. The books in the second half adopt a somewhat different focus, looking instead at troubling issues connected to race and the war on terrorism. Each of the books is available for purchase at the Willamette bookstore.

Your grade will be based, in equal measure, on your participation in class discussion (1/3), short twice weekly response papers and discussion questions for each of the readings (1/3), and a final take home essay that will consist of two essays (1/3).

The grading structure reflects the course's principal "student learning outcomes." Specifically, I will assess your performance in this class on your demonstrated ability to

- (1) contribute constructively to class discussions, which involves both meaningful participation in discussion and leaving room for others to contribute
- (2) articulate cogent arguments and textual analysis that respond both to the texts and to the arguments advanced by classmates
- (3) provide textual evidence in support of claims advanced in class discussion
- (4) formulate fruitful or illuminating discussion questions
- (5) write clear and cogent summaries and analyses that closely and thoughtfully engage the arguments and evidence in the texts

## Schedule of Class Meetings

1. (Aug. 30) Introduction: What's the Matter with American Politics?
2. (Sept. 8) Kate Zernike, *Boiling Mad: Inside Tea Party America* (2010)
3. (Sept. 15) Alton Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Participation, and American Democracy* (2010)
4. (Sept. 22) Paul Pierson and Jacob Hacker, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (2010), 1-160
5. (Sept. 29) Pierson and Hacker, *Winner-Take-All Politics*, 163-306
6. (Oct. 6) Nick Gillespie and Matt Welch, *The Declaration of Independents: How Libertarian Politics Can Fix What's Wrong with America* (2011)
7. (Oct. 13) Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (2011)
8. (Oct. 20) Reading Break
9. (Oct. 27) Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010)
10. (Nov. 3) Desmond King and Rogers Smith, *Still a House Divided: Race and Politics in Obama's America* (2011) [skip part II]
11. (Nov. 10) Benjamin Wittes, *Detention and Denial: The Case for Candor after Guantanamo* (2011)
12. (Nov. 17) Charles Fried and Gregory Fried, *Because It is Wrong: Torture, Privacy and Presidential Power in the Age of Terror* (2010)
13. (Nov. 24) Thanksgiving: no class
14. (Dec. 1): Bruce Ackerman, *The Decline and Fall of the American Republic* (2010)
15. (Dec. 8) Conclusions

Final Take-Home Exam Due Friday, December 16, 10pm