

America's Democracy and Political System (K. Lavdas, M. Simiti, S. Maier)

FALL SEMESTER - ACADEMIC YEAR 2024-2025

A – Course description

The course has two main aims, which it seeks to achieve with the use of lectures and material ranging from introductory to more specialized. First, the course offers an advanced introduction to the formation and current operation of the federal political system of the United States of America. Second, the course also aims to familiarize students with a number of more specialized issues that dominate contemporary American politics and influence – in direct and indirect ways – the quality of democracy and the diverse patterns of societal, group, and individual citizens' engagement and participation in today's US.

In blending fundamental and current issues, institutional aspects and cultural underpinnings, procedural features and normative content, the course invites students to participate in a critical exploration of American democracy without losing sight of the everyday aspects of American politics. The American Republic was born proclaiming that it represented a new and uniquely promising departure in the long journey of human governance. The Founders thought that the new Republic would be prosperous and influential, but they could not foresee that to achieve a viable federal system the Republic would have to go through a tremendously destructive Civil War. Nor could they foresee that the USA would become a world power.

Today's American politics is fascinating both because of the US role in the world and due to the close relationship between American political development and the evolution of modern political science. It was Tocqueville who, studying "Democracy in America" and becoming fascinated with its novel participatory features and enormous promise, suggested that "a new science of politics was necessary for a new world". Political science – in its various specializations – has indeed followed the new Republic very closely and it has, in turn, been influenced by its features and by its concerns.

An auxiliary aim of the course is to encourage each student to relate the broader theoretical and conceptual issues to the experience of particular areas, policy fields and/or current developments. In this spirit, students will be asked to serve as discussants for the material assigned to each session, in addition to writing a paper and participating in the final examination.

B – Assessment and requirements

The course is open to all graduate students and there is no formal course prerequisite. Students are expected to read all assigned material (book chapters, articles, etc). They are also expected to be active

class participants. Course grades will be based on (i) class participation and performance as discussants in class (25%), the assigned student paper (25%) and (iii) the final examination (50%).

C – Sessions

Seminar Section I: The Making of a Federal Republic

Session #1: Introduction to the Modern Federal Political System (Kostas A. Lavdas)

The lecture (ppt) followed by seminar discussion will provide an introduction to the making of the modern and contemporary federal system of the USA. It will focus on institution-building, the early divisions within the federal camp and the development of federal capacities before and after the Civil War.

Required reading:

Burgess, Michael. *Comparative Federalism*. London: Routledge, 2006, chapters 2, 6.

The Constitution of the US

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

Recommended readings:

Lenner, Andrew C. “John Taylor and the Origins of American Federalism”, *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1997), pp. 399-423.

Zelizer, Julian E. “Stephen Skowronek's "Building a New American State" and the Origins of American Political Development” *Social Science History*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2003), pp. 425-441.

Derthick, Martha. “Federalism”. In P. H. Schuck and J. Q. Wilson, eds., *Understanding America*. New York: Public Affairs, 2008, pp 121-145.

Wilson, Charles H. “Federalism”. In I C, D. Cavalli, ed., *The Basics of American Government*, revised ed. Dahlonega, GA: University Press of North Georgia, 2013.

Session #2: We The People? Between Ideas/Ideals and Reality (Sylvia Maier)

“All men are created equal” and “We the People” are the most famous phrases in the American foundational documents - the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution - yet slavery legally existed until 1865, women were denied the right to vote until 1919, and systemic racism continues to impact every aspect of life for people of color. In this session, we will discuss the ideas and ideals behind these powerful—and inspiring—statements, the lived reality, as well as obstacles to and opportunities for their full realization.

The Declaration of Independence
<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs>

The Constitution of the United States of America
<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs>

The 1619 Project (please select a few pieces, incl. Nikole Hannah-Jones's introductory essay))
https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf

Adam Serwer. 2019. "The Fight Over the 1619 Project Is Not About the Facts." *The Atlantic*. 23 December. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/historians-clash-1619-project/604093/>

Pew Research. 2021. "Deep Divisions in Americans' View of Nation's Racial History." 21 August. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/08/12/deep-divisions-in-americans-views-of-nations-racial-history-and-how-to-address-it/>

Pew Center. 2023. "Strengthening Democracy in America: Voice of the People." (20min)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7htD3XKcag8>

Pew Research. 2024. "72% of Americans Say the US Used to be a Good Example of Democracy..."
<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/10/72-of-americans-say-the-us-used-to-be-a-good-example-of-democracy-but-isnt-anymore/>

Alison Durkee. 2024. "Project 2025 Explained." (with links to Project 2025)
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/alisondurkee/2024/10/01/project-2025-explained-what-to-know-about-the-right-wing-policy-map-ahead-of-tonights-vp-debate/>

(Video) A Conversation with CFR President Emeritus, Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations* (30min)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ft6M7ddlobk>
<https://www.cfr.org/teaching-notes/bill-obligations-ten-habits-good-citizens> (Book Summary)

Center for American Progress. 2024. "An American Democracy Built for the People: Why Democracy Matters and How to Make It Work for the 21st Century."
<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/an-american-democracy-built-for-the-people-why-democracy-matters-and-how-to-make-it-work-for-the-21st-century/>

Session #3: *Democratizing the American Republic* (Kostas A. Lavdas)

The lecture (ppt) followed by seminar discussion will focus on the evolution of social cleavages and the factors that led to the gradual democratization of the republic, including the foundation and early development of political parties.

Required reading:

Cavalli, C. D. Political Parties, Voting, and Elections. In C. D. Cavalli, ed., *The Basics of American*

Government, revised ed. Dahlonga, GA: University Press of North Georgia, 2013, pp 109-144.

Brady, H. E. and Thomas B. Kent, 'Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions', *Daedalus*, Vol. 151, No. 4 (2022), pp 43-66.

Recommended readings:

Orren, Karen and Stephen Skowronek. Have We Abandoned a "Constitutional Perspective" on American Political Development? *Review of Politics*, 73. 2 (2011), pp. 295-299.

Ratcliffe, Donald. The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy, 1787—1828. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 33. 2 (2013), pp. 219-254.

Kammen, Michael. *Spheres of Liberty: Changing Perceptions of Liberty in American Culture*, 2nd ed. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001, parts I-II.

González, Francisco E. and Desmond King. The State and Democratization: The United States in Comparative Perspective". *British Journal of Political Science*, 34. 2 (2004), pp. 193-210.

Layman, Geoffrey C. and Edward G. Carmines. Cultural Conflict in American Politics: Religious Traditionalism, Postmaterialism, and U.S. Political Behavior. *Journal of Politics*, 59. 3 (1997), pp. 751- 777.

McClosky, Herbert. Consensus and Ideology in American Politics. *American Political Science Review*, 58. 2 (1964), pp. 361-382.

Seminar Section II: Institutions, Elections and Political Participation

Session #4: *The Congress* (Marilena Simiti)

This lecture will focus on the organization and operations of Congress, the role of parties in Congress and finally the legislative impact of divided governments.

Required Readings:

McKay, D. 2018. *American Politics and Society*, Wiley-Blackwell (chapters 8 and 9)

Valelly, Richard 2013 *American Politics: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (chapter 3).

Jones, David R. 2001. Party Polarization and Legislative Gridlock. *Political Research Quarterly* 54(1): 125-141

Election results, 2022: U.S. Congress. https://ballotpedia.org/Election_results,_2022:_U.S._Congress

Recommended Readings:

Raskin, J. Congress is not just a co-equal branch. We are first among-equals. *Washington Post* https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/congress-isnt-just-a-co-equal-branch-were-first-among-equals/2019/05/09/e3caa552-7206-11e9-9eb4-0828f5389013_story.html

Smith, S. S., Roberts, J. M., & Vander Wielen, R. J. 2012. *The American Congress*, 7th ed., Cambridge University Press (chapter 3).

Cox, G, McCubbins, M. “Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S House of Representatives”. In: Ken Kollman (ed.) (2019) *Readings in American Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, pp. 177-196.

Edwards, G. C., Barrett, A., & Peake, J. 1997. The Legislative Impact of Divided Government. *American Journal of Political Science*, 41(2), 545–563. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111776>

Session#5: The Presidency (Marilena Simiti)

This lecture will introduce students to the presidency as an institution, how it operates, and how it interacts with the other branches in the U.S. separation of powers system.

Required Readings:

Kollman Ken, 2015 *The American Political System* (Chapter 6: The Presidency), New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 185-223

Howell, W. “Power without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action”, In: Ken Kollman (ed.) (2019) *Readings in American Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, pp. 249-262.

Scott Mainwaring and Matthew S. Shugart 1997. ‘Juan Linz, Presidentialism, and Democracy: A Critical Appraisal, *Comparative Politics*, 29(4): 449-471

Elving, Ron. How Does the Electoral College Work, And Is It Fair? NPR (video/text) <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/06/500660424/how-the-electoral-college-works-and-why-you-don-t-want-to-think-about-it>

Recommended Readings:

Cameron, Ch. “Veto Bargaining: Presidents and the Politics of Negative Power”. In: Ken Kollman (ed.) (2019) *Readings in American Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, pp. 222-227

Gardner, J. A. 2020. “Presidential Selection: Historical, Institutional, and Democratic Perspectives”. In: Eugene D. Mazo, Michael R. Dimino (eds.) *The Best Candidate: Presidential Nomination in Polarized Times*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 10–35.

Brandice Canes-Wrone and Scott de Marchi. 2002. Presidential Approval and Legislative Success. *Journal of Politics* 64: 491-509.

Robin, C. "The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump", In: Ken Kollman (ed.) (2019) *Readings in American Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, pp. 263-271.

New York Times, 2020 Elections, <https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/2020-election> (detailed results and maps)

Session #6: *Representing and Mediating: Political Parties, Interest Groups and Lobbying*
(Kostas A. Lavdas)

The lecture (ppt) followed by seminar discussion will revolve around three main questions: (a) what are the differences between interest groups, lobbies, and Political Action Committees (PACs)? (b) how do these different forms influence American politics and government? (c) how do these forms of interest intervention combine with other ways of registering citizens' concerns and societal needs? The discussion will include a number of case studies.

Required readings:

Interest groups: An overview
<https://www.ushistory.org/gov/5c.asp>

Political parties: An overview
<https://www.ushistory.org/gov/5a.asp>

Tichenor, D. J. & Harris, R. A. Organized Interests and American Political Development. *Political Science Quarterly*, 117. 4 (2002) pp 587-612.

Bawn, K. et al. A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics. *Perspectives on Politics*, 10. 3 (2012), pp. 571-597.

Iyengar, S. and Sean J. Westwood, 'Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (2015), pp. 690-707.

Recommended readings:

Strom, K. A Behavioral Theory of Competitive Political Parties. *American Journal of Political Science*, 34. 2 (1990), pp. 565-598.

Walker, J. L. The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America. *American Political Science Review*, vol. 77, no. 2 (1983), pp 390-406.

Claassen, R. L. and Nicholson, S. P. Interest Groups and the Misrepresentation of Issue Publics. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (2013), pp. 861-887.

Hitoshi Mayer, Lloyd. What Is This "Lobbying" That We Are So Worried About? *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 26. 2 (2008), pp. 485-566.

Godwin, K., Ainsworth, S. H., & Godwin, E. *Lobbying and Policymaking: The Public Pursuit of Private Interests* (Los Angeles: Sage / CQ Press, 2013).

Grossmann, M. *The Not-So-Special Interests: Interest Groups, Public Representation, and American Governance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

Session #7: Political Participation, Civic Engagement and Social Movements (Marilena Simiti)

This lecture will explore political participation, focusing on electoral participation, civic engagement and contemporary social movements (on the Left and the Right).

Required Readings:

McKay, D. 2018. *American Politics and Society*, Wiley-Blackwell (chapter 6)

Patterson, Th. 2019. *We the People: An Introduction to American Government*, 13th ed., (chapter 7)

Leihgley, J. and Nagler, J. "Who Votes Now? Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States" in Ken Kollman (ed.) (2019) *Readings in American Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2019.

Malmberg, A. 2020 *Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy*, 2020 Presidential & U.S. Election Resources, American Political Science Association, <https://connect.apsanet.org/raisethevote/2020/09/08/felon-disenfranchisement-and-american-democracy/>

Recommended Readings:

Tarrow, S. 2021. 'The Hybridization of the Party System' (chapter 7) in S. Tarrow *Movements and Parties Critical Connections in American Political Development*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 148 – 172

Skocpol, T., Williamson, V., and John Coggin, J. 2011. The Tea Party and the -Remaking of Republican Conservatism, *Perspectives on Politics* 9(1): 25-43

Scott G. McNall. 2018. *Cultures of Defiance and Resistance: Social Movements in 21st-Century America*. New York: Routledge (chapter 3)

Skocpol, T. 2011. 'Civil Society in the United States'. In: Michael Edwards (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 109-121.

David S. Meyer and Eulalie Laschever 2016 “Social Movements and the Institutionalization of Dissent in America” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development* Edited by Richard Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert Lieberman, Oxford University Press.

Session #8: *Populism, Culture Wars and Identity Politics* (Marilena Simiti)

American democracy is facing a series of challenges involving the rise of populism, deep polarization and ‘culture wars’ that lead to completely different readings of society and democracy.

Required Readings:

Mason, L. “Uncivil Agreement: How Politics became our Identity”. In: Ken Kollman (ed.) (2019) *Readings in American Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, pp. 451-463

Morris P. Fiorina, ‘The Political Parties have Sorted’, Stanford University, https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/fiorina_3_finalfile.pdf

Inglehart, R., Norris, P. 2018. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism*. New York: Cambridge University Press (chapter 1)

Cramer, K. “The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker”, In: Ken Kollman (ed.) (2019) *Readings in American Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, pp. 412-438

Brookings, 2024, *Democracy at a crossroads: Findings from the 15th annual American Values Survey*, <https://www.brookings.edu/events/democracy-at-a-crossroads/>

Recommended Readings:

Heyes, Cressida. 2018. “Identity Politics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/identity-politics/>

Fukuyama, Francis. 2018. Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, 97(5), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2018-08-14/against-identity-politics-tribalism-francis-fukuyama>

Kaltwasser, Cr. 2019. How to define populism? In: Bryan S. Turner, Gregor Fitzi, Jürgen Mackert (eds.) *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, London, New York: Routledge, pp. 62-78

Session #9: *Courts and the Law: Protectors of Civil Rights and Liberties?* (Sylvia Maier)

This session will introduce students to the United States Supreme Court as well as to the key court decisions that stand as examples of the enormous power the Court wields as both a menace to and protector of civil rights.

Article III of the United States Constitution, available at this link:

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs>

Website of the US Supreme Court

<https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/opinions.aspx>

SCOTUS Blog

<https://www.scotusblog.com/>

Guardian Staff. 2024. “US Supreme Court Decisions: The Biggest Cases This Term and Their Outcomes.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/jul/01/supreme-court-cases-decisions-rulings-2023-2024-term>

Adam Klasfeld and Paras Shah. 2024. “Divided Supreme Court Hands Trump Broad Immunity...”

<https://www.justsecurity.org/95636/supreme-court-presidential-immunity/>

Pew Research. 2024. “Favorable Views of Supreme Court Remain Near Historic Low.”

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/08/08/favorable-views-of-supreme-court-remain-near-historic-low/>

Jolynn Dellinger and Stephanie K. Pell. 2024. “The Criminalization of Abortion and Surveillance of Women in a Post-Dobbs World.”

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-criminalization-of-abortion-and-surveillance-of-women-in-a-post-dobbs-world/>

Sam Levin. 2024. “US Supreme Court Rules Unhoused People Sleeping Outside Can be Fined or Jailed.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/jun/28/supreme-court-decision-unhoused-sleeping-outside>

Key cases: *Dred Scott v Sandford*, *Plessy v Ferguson*, *Korematsu v. United States*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Loving v. Virginia*, *Griswold v. Connecticut*, *Roe v. Wade*, *Lawrence v. Texas*, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, *Trump v United States*, *City of Grants Pass, Oregon v. Johnson*

Session #10: *The Politics of Immigration and Gender Equality* (Sylvia Maier)

This session will explore two of the most contentious issues in contemporary US politics: immigration and women’s and LGBTQ rights.

Aristide Zolberg. 2006. *A Nation by Design*. (among the thousands of books on the history and politics of American immigration, this rightfully became an instant classic) Chapter 1 and Conclusion

Priscilla Alvarez. 2017. “A Brief History of America’s Love-Hate Relationship with Immigration.” *The Atlantic*. 19 February.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/donald-trump-immigration/517119/>

Muzaffar Chishti and Colleen Putzel. 2024. “Despite Sharply Different Immigration Rhetoric, Democrats and Republicans Now Have a Similar Approach to the Border.”

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/harris-trump-election-border>

(Video) PBS Thirteen, “NYC's Migrant Crisis: A Citywide Struggle.” (11min)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jFGeOjSfoI>

Excellent resource on current migration issues and policies:

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/>

The Equal Rights Amendment

<https://www.equalrightsamendment.org/>

Women’s History Milestones: A Timeline

<https://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/womens-history-us-timeline>

US Government. National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality. 2021.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/National-Strategy-on-Gender-Equity-and-Equality.pdf>

Audre Lorde, *Who Said It Was Simple?*

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42587/who-said-it-was-simple>

Paula England, Andrew Levine and Emma Mishel. 2020. “Progress Toward Gender Equality in the United States has Slowed or Stalled.” *PNAS*. 31 March. <https://www.pnas.org/content/117/13/6990>

Helen Lewis. 2024. “J. D. Vance’s Very Weird Views About Women.”

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/j-d-vance-views-women/679773/>

Pew Research. 2023. “Women and Political Leadership Ahead of the 2024 Election.” 27 September.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/09/27/women-and-political-leadership-ahead-of-the-2024-election/>

Guttmacher Institute. 2024. The State Abortion Policy Landscape, One Year, Post Roe

<https://states.guttmacher.org/policies/>

Jessica Valenti, Abortion, Everyday News

<https://jessica.substack.com/>

Annette Choi. 2024. “Record Number of Anti-LGBTQ Bills Were Introduced in 2023.”

<https://www.cnn.com/politics/anti-lgbtq-plus-state-bill-rights-dg/index.html>

Omar G. Encarnación. 2020. “The Real Reason the United States Lags on LGBTQ Rights.” *Foreign Policy*. 19 June.

<https://foreignpolicy-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/2020/06/19/the-real-reason-the-united-states-lags-on-lgbtq-rights/>