

Introduction to the American Political Process

MIT | 17.20 | Spring 2022 | T Th 3:00-4:00 PM
<https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/12866>

Contact Information

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Course Description

This course provides an introduction to the academic study of American politics and to the discipline of political science more generally. We will cover a wide range of topics, including the foundational principles of elections, representation, and collective action; American institutional structures such as Congress and the presidency; the activities of strategic political elites; the political behavior of ordinary citizens; and a range of substantive issues relevant to the American context, including race, money in politics, polarization, immigration, and the carceral state. Along the way, we will learn the theoretical and empirical frameworks political scientists use to analyze these topics, with particular emphasis on the advantages and limitations of understanding political actors as rational and strategic decision-makers.

Learning Goals

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Describe the essential formal and informal features of U.S. politics, including federalism, the three branches of government, political parties, and American political culture.
- Understand core theoretical concepts and analytical frameworks of political science, including the various manifestations of power; coordination and collective action problems; and formal and informal institutions.
- Apply these theoretical frameworks to specific episodes and phenomena in American politics.
- Communicate to others their insights into American politics, by means of oral and written compositions of various styles and lengths.

Expectations

- Students are expected to treat each other with respect, listen attentively when others are speaking, and avoid personal attacks. At the same time, all students should feel comfortable expressing their opinions, political or otherwise, as long as they do so in an appropriate manner.
- Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course. As a general rule, you should never take credit for words or ideas that are not your own, and you should give your readers enough information to evaluate the source and quality of your evidence. Self-plagiarism (reusing material you have written in another context) is also not allowed. For more information on plagiarism and academic integrity, consult <http://web.mit.edu/academicintegrity/index.html>.
- Please properly cite any **direct quotations** or **ideas** that you've taken from others. In this class, we will be using the Chicago author-date citation style (the citations in this syllabus follow this style). For details on this style, consult <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org.libproxy.mit.edu>.
- Both lectures and recitations are fully **in-person** this semester. There is no online component to this class, and you are expected to be physically in attendance unless you are sick or unforeseen circumstances have befallen you. If you must miss class or recitation, please email the instructors.

Assessment

This being a communication-intensive HASS (CI-H) subject, written assignments of various lengths are an integral part of the learning process. Another important part of the course is the required readings, which consist primarily of selections from scholarly books and articles. Consistently reading these texts in advance of lecture is critical for success in the class. Specifically, grades in this course are based on five components:

1. **Two short papers (1,000–1,500 words) (15% each):** The short papers are designed to prepare students to write the long paper.
2. **Final paper (3,000–3,500 words) (15% draft, 15% final):** The course culminates in a longer paper, a draft of which will be submitted about a month before the final version is due.
3. **6 short reading responses (500 words each) (15%):** For six class sessions of your choice (starting with Class 3: Representation and Responsiveness), you will write a *short* response (2 double-spaced pages or less) that analyzes an issue or event in the recent news through the lens of that session's readings. Imagine you are a professional political scientist who has been called to comment on the story with your expert opinion, make an argument, and refer directly to the relevant research you've read for that class.

These assignments will be graded with a ✓, ✓–, or ✓+: good, inadequate, and outstanding, respectively. You are welcome to submit another response on a different day for any ✓– you receive.
4. **Oral presentation (10%):** See more information below.
5. **Attendance and participation in recitation and lecture (15%):** Attendance in both recitation and lecture is mandatory, and students will be assessed on the frequency and quality of their participation.

Assignment Dates:

- **Friday, February 25 (11:59 pm):** Short paper 1 due
- **Thursday, March 17:** Short paper 2 due
- **Tuesday, April 19:** First draft of final paper due for peer review
- **Tuesday, May 10:** Final paper due
- The short response papers are due **by the start of class** on the day to which you are responding. For instance, if you are writing for Class 3, the response paper is due before 3:00 PM on Tuesday, February 8.

Written assignments must be uploaded as PDFs to the Homework section of the course Canvas site. Assignments must be uploaded by the start of class on the day they are due. Assignments submitted late will be penalized one-third of a grade (e.g., A to A-) for every 24 hours (e.g., an A paper turned in within 24 hours past the deadline will be an A-, the next 24 hours a B+, and so on). Late short response papers will not be counted.

Required Reading

There is only one required book for the course:

Ken Kollman, ed. 2019. *Readings in American Politics (Fifth Edition)*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Additionally, an important part of this class is learning to be an informed consumer of political news. In addition to the week's assigned academic readings, you are expected to read/skim multiple news outlets of your choice and to be familiar with the main stories of the week. **You will therefore need a few paid journalism subscriptions.** Think of these as equivalent to the expense of another book or two, and no less important than your other required reading. Here are a few suggestions (most have student rates). I urge you to get the top two as a baseline and peruse some others:

1. [The New York Times](#) (available for free to all MIT students)
2. [The Washington Post](#) (currently \$1/month student subscription)
3. [The Guardian](#) (free, but I encourage you to donate whatever you can)
4. Your local news ([The Boston Globe](#) for those in the Cambridge area)
5. [The New Yorker](#) (your first 12 weeks for \$12)
6. [CityLab](#) (free)
7. [The Atlantic](#) (\$30/year)

A list of all periodicals to which MIT has free access is available [here](#).

Oral Presentation

Each student is expected to prepare one oral presentation in their recitation section on a class of their choosing; ideally, a response paper should be written for that class. This should take about 12-15 minutes total, and should include a summary of the student's response paper as well as a brief group discussion. Specifically, the presentation should:

- Inform the group about an issue in the news or current political debate
- Relate that issue to the relevant reading(s)
- Offer an analysis of the issue through the lens of those readings
- Lead the group in a brief discussion by asking one or two open-ended questions

You are welcome but by no means obligated to prepare slides if they would assist you in your presentation. A reasonable allocation of time is 2/3 presentation and 1/3 discussion, but this is not a strict rule. On days when you are not presenting, please help your colleagues by engaging with their questions. Your participation in others' presentations contributes to your recitation grade.

Writing Advising

As this is a communication-intensive course, we will be working closely with a writing advisor from the Writing, Rhetoric and Professional Communication Program (WRAP). All students will receive feedback from and have at least one one-on-one session with a writing advisor during the semester to help them revise their work. Your writing advisor for this course is Kate Parsons, and you can reach her by email at parsonsk@mit.edu.

Kate is your best resource for this course as she is familiar with its content and assignments; however, you always have access to individual consultations regarding any of your MIT communications (writing, presentations, interviews, etc.) through the Writing and Communication Center (WCC). You can learn more about the WCC consultations [here](#), and you can register with the online scheduler to make appointments [here](#).

Semester Overview

I INTRODUCTION

1. **Tuesday, February 1:** Course Introduction
2. **Thursday, February 3:** Sources of American Discontent

II FUNDAMENTALS: DEMOCRACY, ELECTIONS, AND REPRESENTATION

3. **Tuesday, February 8:** Representation and Responsiveness
4. **Thursday, February 10:** Collective Action and Interest Groups
5. **Tuesday, February 15:** Electoral Geography and Voting Rights

III AMERICAN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

6. **Thursday, February 17:** The Constitution
Tuesday, February 22: NO CLASS (Monday Schedule)
7. **Thursday, February 24:** Congress I: The Electoral Connection
8. **Tuesday, March 1:** Congress II: Pivotal Politics
9. **Thursday, March 3:** The Presidency
10. **Tuesday, March 8:** The Bureaucracy
11. **Thursday, March 10:** The Judiciary
12. **Tuesday, March 15:** Parties
13. **Thursday, March 17:** Federalism and State Politics
Tuesday, March 22 and Thursday, March 24: NO CLASS (Spring Break)

IV POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

14. **Tuesday, March 29:** The Rational Voter and Retrospective Voting
15. **Thursday, March 31:** Microfoundations of Public Opinion
16. **Tuesday, April 5:** Partisanship
17. **Thursday, April 7:** Participation

V WHERE WE ARE

18. **Tuesday, April 12:** Polarization
19. **Thursday, April 14:** Money in Politics
20. **Tuesday, April 19:** Media and Misinformation
21. **Thursday, April 21:** Gender Politics
22. **Tuesday, April 26:** The Carceral State
23. **Thursday, April 28:** The Racial Divide
24. **Tuesday, May 3:** White Identity, Rural Politics, and the Rise of Populist Movements
25. **Thursday, May 5:** Immigration
26. **Tuesday, May 10:** Reflections

Course Schedule

Readings posted on the course Canvas site are indicated with [PDF](#), and those available on the internet with [URL](#). Those marked with neither are from the Kollman course reader. Please read the assigned works in the order in which they appear on the syllabus.

I INTRODUCTION

1 Course Introduction

2 Sources of American Discontent

- [PDF](#) Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. 2020. “End Minority Rule.” *The New York Times*.
- [PDF](#) Ezra Klein. 2020. “Why We’re Polarized: An Excerpt.” *The New York Times*.
- [PDF](#) William Howell and Terry Moe. 2017. “America’s Antiquated Constitution.” *Prospect*.
- [PDF](#) Paul Starr. 2019. “The Battle for the Suburbs.” *The New York Review of Books*.

II FUNDAMENTALS: DEMOCRACY, ELECTIONS, AND REPRESENTATION

3 Representation and Responsiveness

- Hanna Fenichel Pitkin. “From *The Concept of Representation*.” Originally published in 1967. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 1.5 (pp. 51-56).
- [PDF](#) Jane Mansbridge. 1999. “Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent ‘Yes.’” *Journal of Politics* 61 (3): 628-657.
- [PDF](#) Martin Gilens. 2012. *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (pp. 12-24). (Stop before “False Consciousness and Elite Manipulation.”)

4 Collective Action and Interest Groups

- Mancur Olson Jr. “From *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*.” Originally published in 1971. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 1.1 (pp. 1-19).
- Ken Kollman. “From *Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion and Interest Group Strategies*.” Originally published in 1998. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 11.1 (pp. 489-503).
- [PDF](#) Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady. *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (pp. 1-10).
- [PDF](#) Dara Z. Strolovitch. 2006. “Do Interest Groups Represent the Disadvantaged? Advocacy at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender.” *Journal of Politics* 68(4).
 - Please read pp. 894-900 (up to Hypothesis and Model) and p. 908 (Discussion and Conclusion).

5 Electoral Geography and Voting Rights

- *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder* (2013). Reprinted in Kollman's *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 13.2 (pp. 579-585).
- [PDF](#) Justice Ginsburg's dissent in *Shelby County, Alabama v. Holder* (2013) (selections).
- [PDF](#) Charles Cameron, David Epstein, and Sharyn O'Halloran. 1996. "Do Majority-Minority Districts Maximize Substantive Black Representation in Congress?" *American Political Science Review* 90(4).
 - Please read pp. 794-799 (up to Data) and pp. 809-810 (Conclusion).
- [PDF](#) Jowei Chen and Jonathan Rodden. 2013. "Unintentional Gerrymandering: Political Geography and Electoral Bias in Legislatures." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8.
 - Please read pp. 239-247 and pp. 264-267 (Discussion).

III AMERICAN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

6 The Constitution

- [PDF](#) Michael Klarman. 2017. "The Constitution as a Coup against the Public Opinion." *Revista Estudos Institucionais* 3(1): 256-266.
- Brutus. *The Antifederalist*, No. 1. Originally published in 1787. Reprinted in Kollman's *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 2.1 (pp. 57-65).
- Robert A. Dahl. "From *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?*" Originally published in 2003. Reprinted in Kollman's *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 2.2 (pp. 66-70).
- Mila Versteeg and Emily Zackin. "From Constitutions Un-entrenched: Toward an Alternative Theory of Constitutional Design." Originally published in 2016. Reprinted in Kollman's *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 2.3 (pp. 71-84).

7 Congress I: The Electoral Connection & Agenda Control

- David R. Mayhew. "From *Congress: The Electoral Connection*." Originally published in 1974. Reprinted in Kollman's *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 5.1 (pp. 159-171).
- Richard F. Fenno Jr. "From *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*." Originally published in 1981. Reprinted in Kollman's *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 5.2 (pp. 172-176).
- Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins. "From *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives*." Originally published in 2005. Reprinted in Kollman's *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 5.3 (pp. 177-196).
- Frances E. Lee. "From *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign*." Originally published in 2016. Reprinted in Kollman's *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 5.5 (pp. 206-212).

8 Congress II: Pivotal Politics

- [PDF](#) Keith Krehbiel. 1998. *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, chapters 1-2 (pp. 3-48).

9 The Presidency

- Richard E. Neustadt. “From *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan*.” Originally published in 1990. Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 6.1 (pp. 213-221).
- Charles M. Cameron. “From *Veto Bargaining: Presidents and the Politics of Negative Power*.” Originally published in 2000. Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 6.2 (pp. 222-227).
- Brandice Canes-Wrone. “From *Who Leads Whom? Presidents, Policy, and the Public*.” Originally published in 2005. Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 6.3 (pp. 228-248).
- William G. Howell. “From *Power Without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action*.” Originally published in 2003. Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 6.4 (pp. 249-262).

10 The Bureaucracy

- [PDF](#) Rachel Augustine Potter. 2019. *Bending the Rules: Procedural Politicking in the Bureaucracy*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, chapter 1 (pp. 1-22).
- [PDF](#) Sean Gailmard and John W. Patty. 2013. *Learning While Governing: Expertise and Accountability in the Executive Branch*.” Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press (selections).
- Mathew D. McCubbins and Thomas Schwartz. “Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols versus Fire Alarms.” *American Journal of Political Science*. Originally published in 1984. Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 7.2 (pp. 287-301).

11 The Judiciary

- [PDF](#) Jeffrey A. Segal and Harold J. Spaeth. 2002. *The Supreme Court and the Attitudinal Model Revisited*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press (selections).
 - See also [this very helpful summary](#) by Tom Pavone (through 3.2.3).
- Gerald N. Rosenberg. “From *The Hollow Hope: Can Courts Bring about Social Change?*” Originally published in 1991. Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 8.1 (pp. 323-329).
- *Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483*. Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 4.2 (pp. 129-133).

12 Parties

- John H. Aldrich. “From *Why Parties? A Second Look*.” Originally published in 2011. Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 12.1 (pp. 521-536).
- Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. “From *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform*.” Originally published in 2008. Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 12.3 (pp. 544-553).
- Ken Kollman, “From Who Drives the Party Bus?” Reprinted in *Kollman’s Readings in American Politics*, chapter 12.4 (pp. 554-556).

- Eric Schickler. “From *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism*.” Originally published in 2016. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 12.5 (pp. 557-566).

13 Federalism and State Politics

- [PDF](#) Jamila Michener. 2018. *Fragmented Democracy: Medicaid, Federalism, and Unequal Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (selections).
- [PDF](#) Lisa L. Miller. 2010. “The Invisible Black Victim: How American Federalism Perpetuates Racial Inequality in Criminal Justice.” *Law & Society Review* 44(3).
 - Please read pp. 805-814 and 826-836.
- [PDF](#) Alexander Hertel-Fernandez. 2019. *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States—And the Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press (selections).

IV POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

14 The Rational Voter and Retrospective Voting

- [PDF](#) Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels. 2017. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (selections).
- [URL](#) Anthony Fowler. 2016. “Football games, shark attacks, and why voters may not be so incompetent after all.” *University of Chicago News*.
- [PDF](#) Gabriel S. Lenz. 2012. *Follow the Leader?: How Voters Respond to Politicians’ Policies and Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (selections).

15 Microfoundations of Public Opinion

- Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins. “From *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?*” Originally published in 1998. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 9.1 (pp. 387-399).
- John R. Zaller. “From *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.” Originally published in 1992. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 9.2 (pp. 400-404).
- Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam. “From *Us Against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion*.” Originally published in 2010. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 9.3 (pp. 405-411).

16 Partisanship

- Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. “From *The American Voter: An Abridgement*.” Originally published in 1964. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 12.2 (pp. 537-543).
- [PDF](#) Donald P. Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler. 2002. *Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identity of Voters*. New Haven: Yale University Press (pp. 1-11).

- [PDF](#) Liliana Mason. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Chapter 1).

17 Participation

- Janelle Wong, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan, Taeku Lee, and Jane Junn. “From *Asian American Political Participation: Emerging Constituents and Their Political Identities*.” Originally published in 2011. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 10.1 (pp. 465-472).
- Jan E. Leighley and Jonathan Nagler. “From *Who Votes Now? Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States*.” Originally published in 2014. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 10.2 (pp. 473-478).
- Eitan D. Hersh. “From *Hacking the Electorate: How Campaigns Perceive Voters*.” Originally published in 2015. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 10.3 (pp. 479-488).

V WHERE WE ARE

18 Polarization

- [PDF](#) Nolan McCarty. 2019. *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press (selections).

19 Money in Politics

- Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens. 2017. *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (selections).
- [PDF](#) Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman. 2016. “Campaign Contributions Facilitate Access to Congressional Officials: A Randomized Field Experiment.” *American Journal of Political Science* 60 (3): 545-558.

20 Media and Misinformation

- [PDF](#) Markus Prior. 2007. *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections*. New York: Cambridge University Press (selections).
- Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow. “From Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election.” Originally published in 2017. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 14.3 (pp. 644-655).
- [PDF](#) Andrew M. Guess. 2021. “(Almost) Everything in Moderation: New Evidence on Americans’ Online Media Diets.” *American Journal of Political Science* 65(4): 1007-1022.

21 Gender Politics

- Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless. “From Gendered Perceptions and Political Candidacies: A Central Barrier to Women’s Equality in Electoral Politics.” *American Journal of Political Science*. Originally published in 2011. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 13.3 (pp. 586-600).

- [PDF](#) Kathleen Dolan. 2014. *When Does Gender Matter?: Women Candidates and Gender Stereotypes in American Elections*. New York: Oxford University Press (selections).
- [PDF](#) Sarah F. Anzia and Christopher R. Berry. 2011. “The Jackie (and Jill) Robinson Effect: Why Do Congresswomen Outperform Congressmen?” *American Journal of Political Science* 55(3).
 - Please read pp. 478-481 and 490-491.

22 The Carceral State

- [PDF](#) Joe Soss and Vesla Weaver. 2017. “Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race–Class Subjugated Communities.” *The Annual Review of Political Science* 20: pp. 566-584.
- [PDF](#) Elizabeth Hinton. 2016. *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press (selections).
- [URL](#) United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. 2015. “Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department.”
 - Please read Section I (pp. 1-6) as well as pp. 9-19.

23 The Racial Divide

- [PDF](#) Michael C. Dawson. 1995. *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (selections).
- Michael Tesler. “From *Post-Racial* or *Most Racial*?: Race and Politics in the Obama Era.” Originally published in 2016. Reprinted in Kollman’s *Readings in American Politics*, chapter 4.1 (pp. 113-128).
- [PDF](#) Ismail K. White and Chryl N. Laird. 2020. *Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (selections).

24 White Identity, Rural Politics, and the Rise of Populist Movements

- [PDF](#) Katherine J. Cramer. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: Chicago University Press (selections).
- [PDF](#) Ashley Jardina. 2019. *White Identity Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press (selections).

25 Immigration

- [PDF](#) Daniel J. Tichenor. 2002. *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (selections).

26 Reflections