

# US Federal Government and Politics

POLS 110-01 // Fall 2021 // Morse-Ingersoll 113 //  
TTh 1:05 PM – 2:20 PM // Professor Philip Chen // [chenp@beloit.edu](mailto:chenp@beloit.edu) //  
Office: Morse-Ingersoll 111 // Office Hours: Tuesdays 10:00 – 11:30 AM

## **Course Description**

U.S. Federal Government and Politics (1). Introduction to U.S. government and politics at the national and state levels. Provides background on guiding principles, constitutional guarantees, the federal system, major institutions, and mechanisms that link citizens to officials. Covers both federal and state levels and their interaction in topics such as elections and political executives, which include the president and governors. Illustrative use of public policy materials, as well as current events and issues. Serves as a basic course for any student wishing to gain a foundation in U.S. politics and as the prerequisite for many courses in the American politics subfield.

## **Course Objectives**

By the end of this semester, you should be able to:

- Understand and describe the basic structure of American government
- Analyze and explain how this structure enables or constrains policy making in America
- Compare the strengths and weaknesses of the American system with other democratic institutions

In addition to these specific learning goals, there are several skills that I believe are especially important for this course. By the end of the semester, you should have:

- Gained basic factual knowledge about the American political system
- Developed writing and oral presentation skills
- Learned to analyze and critically evaluate different arguments and theories

## **Structure of the Class**

As an introductory class in American politics, some classes will be devoted heavily to me lecturing. However, while I will lecture on new topics or extensions of the readings, I will not simply regurgitate the readings because a) you are expected to have read them already and b) I'm not witty or interesting enough to lecture about this type of material.

In addition to lecture days, we will also spend a good portion of class on discussion and activities designed to help you integrate the readings and materials. Please come to class prepared to discuss the day's readings and bring copies of the readings, either in electronic or paper form, as this is a key component of this course.

## Office Hours and Help

I strive to make this course understandable and accessible for all students. If you have any questions about the content or structure of the course or about specific assignments, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am always happy to help if you come to me before assignments or exams are due. Please do not wait to ask for help until after the due date, come talk to me before if you are struggling.

## Required Texts

This class will feature mostly academic books and articles. The required books are listed below and are available at the college bookstore or from Amazon or other places online. Readings are available on the class Moodle site at:

<https://moodle.beloit.edu/course/view.php?id=283>

There are two required books for this class:

Poloni-Staudinger, Lori & Michael Wolf. 2016. *American Difference*. (Referred to as P-S & W)

Smith, Raymond. 2014. *The American Anomaly*. (Referred to as Smith)

## Grading

Grades are based on four different components, described in more detail below. 40% of your grade will come from a final issue paper (1) on a topic of your choosing. An additional 20% of your grade will come from debate participation and position papers (2) written by your group. 10% of your grade consists of attendance and participation in class (3). Finally, 30% of your grade consists of weekly reading quizzes (4).

Reading Quizzes (Top 6)	25%	
Debate Preparation, Writing, and Participation		
Position Papers (500-750 words each)	10%	
Response Papers (250 words each)	10%	
Final Policy Strategy Paper		
List of Potential Issues		Required (No Grade)
Issue Description (500-750 words)		Required (No Grade)
Institutional Analysis (1000-1250 words)		Required (No Grade)
Public Opinion Analysis (1000-1250 words)		Required (No Grade)
Rough Draft with Policy Strategy (3000-3500 words)		Required (No Grade)
Paper Conference Attendance		Required (No Grade)
Final Draft (3000-3500 words)	40%	
Participation & Attendance	15%	

**Policy Strategy Paper (40%)** – As part of the course, you will be required to pick an issue of personal interest that would be decided at the federal level. Using the readings from class as well

as additional scholarly readings that you locate, you will complete a variety of different assignments meant to build towards a final policy strategy paper. Your goal is to lay out a coherent description of the issue, the current barriers to success, and a strategy for interest groups to use in order to achieve your desired policy goal.

The final paper contains four components: a description of the issue and the current laws and legislation surrounding the issue (1), an analysis of the institutional constraints and where the issue is likely to be decided (2), an analysis of the public's beliefs and attitudes surrounding the issue (3), and a policy strategy recommendation based on the institutional and public opinion context (4). More information about this assignment will be provided later in the semester.

You'll notice a number of components marked "Required for Grade." These pieces of the policy strategy paper can be thought of as low stakes requirements. In order to receive full credit on your final paper, you must turn in all of these components, even though your performance on these assignments does not factor into your grade. Failing to turn in these assignments will lower your final project grade by 1/3 of a letter grade for each missing piece. For instance, if your grade for the entire paper was a B+, but you failed to turn in your list of potential issues, your final grade for the project would be a B. If you were missing both the list of potential issues and issue description, your B+ would become a B-.

**Weekly Reading Quizzes (25%)** – Over the past couple years, I've come to dislike the concept of midterm and final exams because they place a premium on memorization and intense study rather than a cohesive synthesis of the material we read. In essence, finals and midterms seem to encourage students to memorize minutiae instead of substance.

However, the readings for this class were chosen with intention and I believe they are important for students to get the most out of the class. I will not lecture much on the readings, as I believe classroom discussions are both more enjoyable and a better way for students to learn the ability to critique and challenge the works we read. In order for you to be prepared for these discussions, you will need to do the readings.

While I would love to be able to simply ask "did you do the reading?" and grade you on this, it seems unrealistic. On Thursday of each week we will have a short, graded reading quiz. These quizzes will consist of a few multiple choice or short answer questions, as well as one or two longer (2-3 paragraph) questions that ask you to synthesize the readings in some way.

I understand that sometimes things come up and readings don't get done. Over the course of the semester, there are 7 Thursdays when I will administer quizzes. Out of these 7 quizzes, I will drop your lowest score. The remaining 6 quizzes will make up 25% of your grade. While no one quiz will make or break your final grade, failing to do any of the readings will severely limit your potential in this class.

At the end of the semester, I will simply take your highest 6 grades and average them. Because you have a quiz that is not counted, you cannot make up quizzes for unexcused absences. However, if you are going to miss a quiz and let me know ahead of time, we can make arrangements for you to take the quiz at a different time. If you are sick or have an approved

absence, just make sure to send me an email or talk to me before the quiz so we can schedule a time for you to take the quiz.

**Debate Preparation, Writing, and Participation (20%)** – Throughout the course, we will have three debate days and three debate prep days. Each of you will be assigned one of four groups and will research and prepare for these short debates. Your group will be assigned a position on the debate resolution. Every student is required to participate as a debater at least one time.

For each of the three debates, your group is responsible for a position paper. These three papers make up 10% of your grade. These 500-750 word position papers should lay out your group's debate strategy, the position on the resolution your group is taking, and the evidence you plan to use to support your position.

Each debate day will be divided into two debates. In addition to the position paper, you are responsible for short response papers on two of the three debates that you were not a participant in. These papers will make up an additional 10% of your grade. In these papers (approximately one page), you need to assess which team, in your opinion, made the stronger argument and support your thesis with arguments made during the debate itself.

**Participation (15%)** – The participation portion of your grade includes regular attendance in class, completion of in-class activities, participation in class discussions, asking questions during class, and, most importantly, *being an active and committed member of the simulation*.

A third of this grade (5%) is based purely off of attendance. I will hand out a sheet for everyone to sign in at the start of class. If you are late to class, please check with me after class to make sure I've recorded your attendance for the day. I will use the following scale to determine your attendance grade:

A	0 – 1 absences
A-	2 – 3 absences
B+	4 absences
B	5 absences
B-	6 absences
C+	7 absences
C	8 absences
C-	9 absences
D+	10 absences
D	11 absences
F	12 or more absences

NOTE: This count does NOT include excused absences. If you miss class because of an approved college activity, illness, or prior arrangement with me, this will not count against your attendance grade.

The next third of this grade (5%) is based on in-class participation. I'll advise you that I take the participation portion of the class seriously. I give very few A grades for participation. Thus, you shouldn't assume that simply attending class regularly is enough to get full participation. I grade

participation holistically. If you are attentive in class, offer opinions and reactions to readings, and are engaged in discussion, you will do fine. But these are not simply “free” points for the class.

The final third of this grade (5%) is based off of the final campaign simulation. For this portion, I will assess your participation both through my own observations as well as an anonymous peer evaluation of your contributions. Successful completion of the simulation can involve a high-profile role (like a campaign manager or candidate) but can also involve behind the scenes work like preparing your candidate for the debate.

**Grade Scale:**

A	93-100	C	73-76
A-	90-92	C-	70-72
B+	87-89	D+	67-69
B	83-86	D	63-66
B-	80-82	D-	60-62
C+	77-79	F	<60

**Grading** – On some assignments, you may receive a grade of B+/A- or something like that. This is just my shorthand way of assigning a number grade between two letter grades. Thus, an A grade is recorded in the grade book as 100 points while an A- grade is recorded as 92 points. If I think your work fell between these points, you may get an A-/A, which would be recorded as 96 points. So a A-/A is technically an A grade, but in the middle of the A range instead of the high end. When calculating final grades, I always round up. So an 88.7% in the class becomes an 89% (B+), but an 89.1% would be rounded up to a 90% (A-).



- September 23 (RQ) Read: Judiciary (Bond & Smith)\*  
Smith Ch. 7  
Rosenberg\*
- September 28 **DUE: Debate Response Paper #1**  
Read: Mansbridge\*  
Banducci, Donovan, and Karp\*  
Lebron\*
- September 30 **Due: Issue Description**  
Debate Prep (In Class)  
Read: Debating Reform Ch. 15\*  
Debating Reform Ch. 17\*
- October 5 (RQ) Read: Devins\*  
Tesler & Sears Ch. 4\*  
Goldman & Mutz Ch. 1\*
- October 7 **DUE: Position Paper #2**  
In Class Debates – No Readings
- October 12 NO CLASS (Fall Break)
- October 14 NO CLASS (Fall Break)

Parties, Public Opinion, Elections, and Behavior

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- October 19 Read: P-S & W Ch. 7  
Smith Ch. 10  
Prior\*
- October 21 (RQ) **DUE: Institutional Analysis**  
**DUE: Debate Response Paper #2**  
Read: Smith Ch. 11  
Lenz\*
- October 26 Read: P-S & W Ch. 8  
Smith Ch. 9
- October 28 Debate Prep (In Class)  
Read: Debating Reform Ch. 9\*  
Debating Reform Ch. 10\*

November 2 (RQ)    Read: Gilens and Page 2014\*  
                              Lawless & Fox\* (Ch. 3)  
                              Smith Ch. 12

November 4            **DUE: Position Paper #3**  
                              In Class Debates – No Readings

### Congressional Election Simulation

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November 9            Research + Prep Day  
                              Read: Dolan & Ezra Ch. 1\*  
                              Dolan & Ezra Ch. 2\*

November 11 (RQ)    **DUE: Public Opinion Analysis**  
                              **DUE: Debate Response Paper #3**  
                              Research + Prep Day  
                              Read: Green & Gerber\*  
                              Teresi & Michelson\*

November 16            Research + Prep Day

November 18            **DUE: Rough Draft with Strategy Recommendation**  
                              NO CLASS (Paper Conferences)

November 23            NO CLASS (Paper Conferences)

November 25            NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

November 30            Election Simulation  
                              *Campaign Events*  
                              *Debate*

December 2            Final Class – No Readings

December 8            **DUE: Final Paper by 5 PM**



Attendance: Regular attendance is vital for your success in this course. I understand, however, that sometimes circumstances prevent you from coming to class. Missing one class will not destroy your grade; missing several will.

Grade Changes: Any appeals of a grade must be made at least **24 hours after** I hand back an assignment or exam. If you would like to appeal the grade you got on an assignment, prior to meeting with me you must submit a written statement detailing why you think your grade should be changed. I will then meet with you to discuss your statement and why you think your grade should be changed.

If I make a mistake in totaling your grade for an exam or assignment (e.g. I added the points up incorrectly) then you do not need to write a statement or wait 24 hours. Just talk to me after class or during office hours and I'll double check and fix the mistake.

Contacting the Professor: I encourage you to contact me with questions and concerns about the course, readings, and assignments. In general, quick clarification questions can be handled over email. More in-depth questions are best discussed in person during my office hours, where we can have an actual conversation. If my office hours conflict with your class or work schedule, I am available by appointment as well.

Please allow a full 24 hours for an email response. Often, my responses will be quicker than this, but do not send multiple emails about the same request until 24 hours have passed. I cannot guarantee that if you email me right before an assignment or exam that I will be able to answer your question in time, so please make sure and email me early if you have a time-specific question.

Extra Credit and Retakes: There is on scheduled extra credit opportunity in the class. You may not retake quizzes.

Disability Services and Accommodations: Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. In particular, If you have a disability and need accommodations, contact Learning Enrichment and Disability Services (LEADS) located on 2nd floor Pearsons (north side), [608-363-2572](tel:608-363-2572), [learning@beloit.edu](mailto:learning@beloit.edu) or through [olesena@beloit.edu](mailto:olesena@beloit.edu). For accommodations in my class, you are to bring me an Access Letter from the Director of LEADS and then we will discuss how to implement the accommodations. Contact that office promptly; accommodations are not retroactive.

**Free peer tutoring** is available for most classes. For a tutor, apply by going to your Portal, to the Student Life tab, and then apply using the Tutoring Forms (on left) and Request a Tutor. If you have any questions, contact LEADS.

If you want support from an **Organizational Tutor**, they are available in the Learning Lab (Blaisdell 103B) Sundays through Thursdays from 6-8 pm. You also can request an organizational tutor on the portal.

Every effort will be made to give you agency over disclosure of your disability status. Confidentiality is maintained to the extent possible but at times others need to know to some information to provide you appropriate accommodations.

Inclusivity: **Inclusivity** is a demonstration of equity and social justice through awareness, understanding, and respect for the differences in identity, culture, background, experience, and socialization, and the ways in which these forms of difference impact how we live and learn. Inclusivity requires equitable, institution-wide representation and access to resources. In practice, this manifests itself by each individual being aware of, committed to, and responsible for the well-being and care of all students, staff, and faculty.