

Introduction to American Politics

PLSC 1000-1 // Winter 2024 // Sturm 253 //
MW 2:00 – 3:50 PM // Professor Philip Chen // philip.chen@du.edu
Office: Sturm Hall 474 // Office Hours: Tuesdays 12:30 PM – 2:30 PM

Land Acknowledgement

The University of Denver and the city of Denver reside within the traditional territories of Hinonoeino (Arapaho), Tsitsista (Cheyenne), and Nunt'zi (Ute). I recognize the descendant communities of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe of Montana, the Northern Arapaho Tribe of Wyoming, the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, and the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. I also acknowledge that over 40 different Indigenous nations continue to be in relation with the lands currently called Colorado.

Denver is home to many different citizens of Indigenous nations, and I recognize their enduring presence on this land by paying respects to their elders, both past and present. In class and throughout your time at the University of Denver, I ask that we consider the legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and resettlement perpetrated against Indigenous nations and reflect upon and reconcile how the genocidal acts against Indigenous communities intersect with our learning, collaboration, and sharing of knowledge.

Course Description

Philosophical traditions, historical background, structure and functioning of American government, and political attitudes and behavior. This course counts toward the Scientific Inquiry: Society and Culture requirement.

Course Objectives

By the end of this quarter, 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 quarter, 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, 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 Canvas site at:

<https://canvas.du.edu/courses/172085>

There are two required books for the course:

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 issues paper (1) on the topic of your choosing. An additional 40% of your grade consists of three tests based on the readings given in the 3rd, 6th, and 9th weeks of the quarter (2). 10% of your grade will come from a response essay on the readings for one day of class (3). The final 10% of your grade consists of attendance and participation in class (4).

Reading Tests	40%
Final Policy Strategy Paper	
List of Potential Issues	3% (Pass/No Pass)
First Half Draft	3% (Pass/No Pass)

Rough Draft with Policy Strategy		3% (Pass/No Pass)
Final Draft	31%	
Response Essay	10%	
Participation & Attendance	10%	

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 quarter.

You’ll notice a number of components marked “Pass/No Pass.” 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. If you turn in something for these assignments, you will get the full credit for that piece. This allows me to give you feedback throughout the quarter.

Reading Tests (40%) – 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. During the 3rd, 6th, and 9th weeks of the quarter, we will have reading tests that cover the previous three weeks’ worth of readings. These tests will consist of a few multiple choice or short answer questions, as well as longer (1-3 paragraph) questions that ask you to synthesize the readings in some way.

These reading tests will be posted on Canvas and available for a week for you to take when they are convenient to you. You are welcome to use both class and reading notes and the readings to answer the questions.

Response Essay (10%) – Each student will complete one response essays on the readings for a specific day. You will have an opportunity to pick the class session that you would like to write about.

Response essays are due to me **by the beginning of class on the day you are responding to**. For example, if you signed up to write about the readings on Monday, April 17, your essay would be due to me by that Monday at the start of class.

Each paper should include a brief summary of the arguments in the reading(s) and a critique of the argument, evidence, and conclusions. Papers should be approximately 2 pages long, double spaced. I will distribute a separate handout with more information about this assignment.

Participation and Attendance (10%) – The participation portion of your grade includes regular attendance in class, completion of in-class activities, participation in class discussions, and asking questions during class.

Half of this grade 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. There are 18 days in the quarter that we will meet as a class, and I will use the following scale to determine your attendance grade:

A (100%)	0 – 1 absences
B (86%)	2 – 3 absences
C (76%)	4 – 5 absences
D (66%)	6 – 7 absences
F (60%)	8 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. But you do need to let me know!

The other half of this grade 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.

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-).

Wednesday, February 7 Read: Mansbridge*
Banducci, Donovan, and Karp*
Lebron*

Week 6 – Political Institutions

Monday, February 12 Read: Prior*
Teresi & Michelson*
Gilens*

Wednesday, February 14 Read: P-S & W Ch. 6
Devins*
Tesler & Sears Ch. 4*
DUE: First Half Draft
Reading Quiz #2 Opens

Week 7 – Parties, Public Opinion, Elections, and Behavior

Monday, February 19 Read: P-S & W Ch. 7
Smith Ch. 10

Wednesday, February 21 Read: P-S & W Ch. 8
Smith Ch. 9
DUE: Reading Quiz #2

Week 8 – Parties, Public Opinion, Elections, and Behavior

Monday, February 26 Read: Smith Ch. 11
Lenz*

Wednesday, February 28 Read: Lawless & Fox* (Ch. 3)
Lawless & Fox* (Ch. 3)
Gilens and Page 2014*
DUE: Rough Draft with Policy Strategy

Week 9 – Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

Monday, March 4 Read: McClain & Tauber Ch. 12*
*Brown v Board of Education**
MLK, Letter from Birmingham Jail*

Wednesday, March 6 Read: Lewis*
Debating Reform Ch. 3*
Debating Reform Ch. 4*
Reading Quiz #3 Opens

Week 10 – Policymaking

Monday, March 11 Read: Smith Ch. 12
 Mettler Introduction*
 Mettler Ch. 1*

Wednesday, March 13 Final Class – No Readings
DUE: Reading Quiz #3

Week 11 – Final Class

Monday, March 18 Catch Up Day – No Class, Open Office Hours

Wednesday, March 20 **Final Draft Due by 3:50 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.

Late Work: Assignments are due by the end of the day they are listed as due, unless otherwise specified in the syllabus. Any assignments turned in after this time will be subject to the following late penalty: For each day late, I will deduct a third of a letter grade. So if an assignment is due Friday and you turn it in on Saturday, a B+ paper would receive a B. If you turn it in Sunday, it would be a B-, Monday would be a C. Assignments should be turned in using the Canvas system.

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 (email is fine) 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 no scheduled extra credit in this course. You may not retake quizzes. There may be opportunities for extra credit, however.

Disability Services and Accommodations: Students with diverse learning styles, backgrounds, and needs are welcome in this course. Students who have disabilities (i.e., physical, medical, mental, emotional, and/or learning) and who want to request accommodations should contact the Disability Services Program (DSP); (303) 871-3241; 1999 E. Evans Ave.; 4th floor of Ruffatto Hall. Information is also available online at www.du.edu/dsp; see Handbook for Students with Disabilities