

AMERICAN POLITICS

Spring 2026

Political Science 121
Haverford College

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Office: Hall 105
Hours: M 2:30-3:30; F 2-3
(and by appointment)

Course Description

This course introduces students to the dynamics and tensions that underlie American politics and government. We will start with the creation of the United States and think about how the values and practices of the Founders shaped the establishment of the nation's political institutions and processes. Much of the first half of the semester will then be devoted to analyzing the primary institutions of governance, including the Congress, presidency, bureaucracy, and courts. Next, we will examine the important mechanisms that link Americans to the government such as political parties, the electoral system, interest groups, public opinion, and the media. Throughout the course we will contemplate a number of fundamental questions: Who wields power in American society and politics? Do ordinary citizens have adequate opportunities to express their views, influence decision makers, and shape public policy? Does the government produce public policy that responds more or less to the will of the majority? Are minority rights sufficiently protected? To what extent does the political system properly balance competing ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy? Do political institutions exercise appropriate or undue power, or are they essentially ineffectual? To what extent is democracy in America at risk in the current era?

Course Requirements

Class Participation	20%
First Paper (5 pages)	20%
Second Paper (5 pages)	20%
Third Paper (10 pages)	40%
Film in Gest 101: Wednesday, March 18, 7:30-8:45	

Note: Papers submitted after the due date will be penalized by one third of a grade each day they are late.

Required Texts

All assigned readings will be accessible on Moodle.

Topics and Readings

Week 1

- I. Introduction to Course
- II. Democracy in America

Andrew Marantz, "Is It Happening Here?" *The New Yorker*, May 5, 2025

Eric Lach, "The Mandami Era Begins," *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2025

Week 2

- III. The Founding

Joseph J. Ellis, "The Argument" in *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic*

James Madison, *The Federalist No. 10* in *Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, eds. Samuel Kernell and Steven S. Smith

Brutus, *The Antifederalist, No. 3* in *Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, eds. Samuel Kernell and Steven S. Smith

Fintan O'Toole, "What the Founders Would Say Now," *Atlantic*, October 10, 2025

Jill Lepore, "What Was the American Revolution For?" *The New Yorker*, November 17, 2025

Week 3

- IV. Federalism

- A. Divided Authority

Donald F. Kettl, "Madison's Balancing Act" and "E Pluribus Plura" in *The Divided States of America: Why Federalism Doesn't Work*

- B. The Debate over Devolution

Rebecca Bromley-Trujillo and Michael Dichio, "The State of American Federalism, 2024-2025: Resisting and Reinforcing the Rise of the Transactional Presidency," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, Summer 2025

Martin K. Mayer, et al., "Dobbs, American Federalism, and State Abortion Policymaking: Restrictive Policies Alongside Expansion of Reproductive Rights," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, Summer 2023

Barbara Warner and Jennifer Shapiro, "Fractured, Fragmented Federalism: A Study in Fracking Regulatory Policy," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, Summer 2013

Jacob M. Grumbach, "Introduction" in *Laboratories against Democracy: How National Politics Transformed State Politics*, pp. 1-13

Week 4

V. Congress

A. Context

Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, “The First Branch of Government: Theory and Practice,” *The Broken Branch: How Congress Is Failing America and How to Get It Back on Track*

B. Polarization

Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, “The Seeds of Dysfunction” and “Beyond the Debt Ceiling Crisis Fiasco” in *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks*

Frances E. Lee, “The Ins versus the Outs” (pp. 1-12) in *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign*

Mia Costa, “How Politicians Polarize” (pp. 1-11) in *How Politicians Polarize: Political Representation in an Age of Negative Partisanship*

Alison W. Craig, “Collaboration in Congress (Yes, It Exists!)” in *The Collaborative Congress: Reaching Common Ground in a Polarized House*

Week 5

C. Representation

Kelly Dittmar, Kira Sanbontasu, and Susan J. Carroll, “Introduction” in *A Seat at the Table: Congresswomen’s Perspectives and Why Their Presence Matters*

Nicholas Carnes, “Government by the Privileged” in *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office – And What We Can Do About It*

D. Money and the Legislative Process

Danielle M. Thomsen, “The Meaning of Money” in *The Money Signal: How Fundraising Matters in American Politics*

E. Congress and the Presidency

David D. Kilpatrick, “The Invisible Man,” *The New Yorker*, April 7, 2025

Weeks 5-6

VI. The Presidency

A. Context

Kenneth Lowande, “Presidential Power in a Polarized Age” in *False Front: The Failed Promise of Presidential Power in a Polarized Age*, pp. 1-25

B. Presidential Power

William G. Howell, Excerpt from *Power without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action in Readings in American Politics: Analysis and Perspectives*, 6th ed., Ken Kollman, ed.

Terry M. Moe and William G. Howell, "Introduction" in *Trajectory of Power: The Rise of the Strongman Presidency*

J. Michael Luttig, "President for Life," *Atlantic*, October 28, 2025

Elaine Godfrey, "The Trump Voters Who Like What They See," *Atlantic*, April 30, 2025

Michael Scherer, "The Anti-Trump Strategy That's Actually Working," *Atlantic*, September 2, 2025

FIRST PAPER DUE

Week 7

VII. The Bureaucracy

A. Perceptions of Bureaucracy

Donald F. Kettl and Paul Glastris, "Memorandum to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez," *The Washington Monthly*, July/August 2021

B. Dismantling the Administrative State

Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, "Naming It" in *Ungoverning: The Attack on the Administrative State and The Politics of Chaos*

Andy Kroll, "The Technocrat Engineering a Vast Expansion of Trump's Power," *The New Yorker*, October 27, 2025

Nick Miross, "Every State Is a Border Patrol State," *Atlantic*, November 20, 2025

Nick Miross, "Fast Times at Immigration and Customs Enforcement," *Atlantic*, August 26, 2025

C. Administrative Policymaking

Rachel Augustine Potter, "The Power of Procedure" in *Bending the Rules: Procedural Politicking in the Bureaucracy*

Jane Mayer, "Back to the Jungle," *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2020

Week 8

Spring Break

Weeks 9-10

VIII. The Judiciary

A. Judicial Decision Making

Antonin Scalia, Excerpt from “A Matter of Interpretation: Federal Courts and the Law” in *Principles and Practice of American Politics: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, eds. Samuel Kernell and Steven S. Smith
David A. Strauss, “Introduction: Do We Want a Living Constitution?” in *The Living Constitution*

B. School Desegregation

Brown v. Board of Education (1954)
David A. Strauss, “*Brown v. Board of Education* and Innovation in the Living Constitution (with a Note on *Roe v. Wade*)” in *The Living Constitution*
Film: “Brick by Brick: A Civil Rights Story”

C. Abortion

Roe v. Wade (1973)
Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization (2022)
Robert L. Tsai and Mary Ziegler, “Why the Supreme Court Really Killed *Roe v. Wade*,” *Politico*, June 25, 2023

D. The Role of the Courts in the American Political System

Kevin J. McMahon, “The Supreme Court’s Democracy Gap and the Erosion of Legitimacy” and “Numerical Minority Justices as a Conservative Majority” in *The Deepening Divide Between the Justices and the People*

Week 11

IX. Political Parties

A. Foundations

John H. Aldrich, Excerpt from *Why Parties? A Second Look* in *Readings in American Politics: Analysis and Perspectives*, 6th ed., Ken Kollman, ed.

B. Democratic Party

David Brooks, “How the Bobos Broke America,” *The Atlantic*, September 2021
Eyal Press, “The Worker Revolt,” *The New Yorker*, October 7, 2024
Suzanne Mettler and Trevor E. Brown, “Rural Revival,” *Washington Monthly*, November/December 2025
Gilead Edelman, “What Chris Murphy Learned from the New Right,” *Atlantic*, June 24, 2025

C. The Republican Party

Julian E. Zelizer, "Reckoning with the Trumpian GOP" in *The Presidency of Donald J. Trump*, ed. Julian E. Zelizer

Emma Green, "Family Plan," *The New Yorker*, November 18, 2024

Stephanie McGummen, "Charlie Kirk and the Third Great Awakening," *Atlantic*, September 27, 2025

Jonathan Chait, "The Force That Holds Trump's Coalition Together," *Atlantic*, April 22, 2025

SECOND PAPER DUE

Week 12

X. Campaigns and Elections

A. Participation

John Holbein and D. Sunshine Hillygus, Excerpt from *Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action* in *Readings in American Politics: Analysis and Perspectives*, 6th ed., Ken Kollman, ed.

B. Threats to Democratic Elections

Jane Mayer, "Goodbye, Columbus," *The New Yorker*, August 15, 2022

Ann Southworth, "The Players and the Process," *Big Money Unleashed: The Campaign to Deregulate Election Spending*

Jonathan Rauch and Ray La Raja, "Too Much Democracy Is Bad for Democracy," *The Atlantic*, December 2019

David A. Graham, "Donald Trump's Plan to Subvert the Midterms Is Already Under Way," *Atlantic*, October 28, 2025

Week 13

XI. Interest Groups

Jeffrey M. Berry and Clyde Wilcox, "Madison's Dilemma" in *The Interest Group Society*, 6th ed.

Lee Drutman, "The Pervasive Position of Business" in *The Business of America Is Lobbying: How Corporations Became Politicized and Politics Became More Corporate*

Jeffrey M. Berry and Clyde Wilcox, "Public Opinion and Grassroots Lobbying" in *The Interest Group Society*, 6th ed.

Matthew J. Lacombe, "Explaining the NRA's Power" in *Firepower: How the NRA Turned Gun Owners into a Political Force*

Week 14

XII. Politics and the Media

Robert Kaiser, "The Bad News About the News" in *Current Debates in American Government*, eds. Ryan Emenaker and James A. Morone

McKay Coppins, "The 2020 Disinformation War," *The Atlantic*, March 2020

Andrew Marantz, "You Mad, Bro?" *The New Yorker*, March 24, 2025

XIII. Public Opinion

Jeffrey M. Berry, James M. Glaser, and Deborah J. Schildkraut, "Ideology and Everyday Democracy" in *Everyday Democracy: Liberals, Conservatives, and Their Routine Political Lives*

Adam J. Berinsky, "Introduction" in *Political Rumors: Why We Accept Misinformation and How to Fight It*

Week 15

XIV. Concluding Thoughts: Democracy in America

Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, and Daniel Ziblatt, "The Price of American Authoritarianism: What Can Reverse Democratic Decline?" *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2026

FINAL PAPER DUE