

American Government (POL 110), Fall 2023

Instructor: Professor Sara Morell (she/her/hers)

Email: morells@tcnj.edu

Class Time: SECTION 01: Mondays and Thursdays 3:30-4:50 p.m. in Social Sciences 223

SECTION 02: Mondays and Thursdays 11:00-12:20 p.m. in Social Sciences 225

Office Hours: Mondays and Thursdays 9:30-10:50 a.m. ([SIGN UP HERE](#))

Office Location: Social Sciences 239

You: If you would like me to refer to you by a name or pronouns other than those on the class roster, please let me know.

Course Overview:

The purpose of this course is to provide a comprehensive overview of the structures and processes of the American political system. This course is guided by a fundamental question: “How democratic is the U.S. political system?” Each week, we will discuss how a different aspect of American political structures, institutions, or people’s behavior within our political system reflect democratic ideals in practice. This includes topics like civil rights and civil liberties, political participation, campaigns and media, and electoral representation. This course challenges students to think critically about their political world, through discussion that considers both historical and current events, while also helping students to develop writing and analytic skills.

Learning Goals:

More specifically this course aims to introduce students to methods of analysis common in the political science discipline in the following ways:

1. Develop critical analysis and reasoning skills, such as the ability to form and evaluate arguments about U.S. politics. It is important to emphasize that this course is **not** about whether specific political opinions are good or bad, but rather will encourage students to evaluate claims about our political structure. Examples include: “What are the benefits and drawbacks of a federal system?” and “How influential are political parties in determining who runs for office?”
2. Evaluate the contemporary U.S. political system, as well as its primary political processes and institutions, with an eye both to historic conceptions of the American government’s stated goals and contemporary debates about the purpose and functioning of our political system.
3. Prepare students to participate in professional and civic life, through the development information and data literacy, oral and written communication, and critical thinking skills.
4. Learn the foundational methodological approaches to the study of political science. This course is carefully scaffolded such that students will be challenged each week with material that reflects how contemporary political scientists think about the field, while also building the toolkit overtime to discuss and analyze these materials. The course also introduces students to some of the basic principles of how we can evaluate political science texts.

The course is designed to meet several Middle States/School of Humanities and Social Sciences learning goals, including strengthening your critical analysis and reasoning skills, enhancing your information literacy, preparing you for participation in the civic life of your city, state, and nation, and building your understanding of key political processes and institutions at all levels of government. This course's "fourth hour" is met through additional learning tasks that students complete outside the classroom in order to make the semester's learning experience more deeply engaging and rigorous. Students are required to read extensively, remain up-to-date on current events, and complete outside research and writing projects.

A Note for Majors:

POL 110 is one of Political Science's core courses. Unless students took a course in American politics of government prior to TCNJ, political science majors must pass the course to remain in the major. For more information, please see the [program bulletin](#) for Political Science.

Course Format:

This course is meant to give you a broad introduction to the various ways that we study the American political system. The purpose of this class is to introduce you to college-level reading, discussion, and writing, and so you are expected to come to class having done the readings and ready with questions and ideas based on what they said. This course will be discussion-heavy, and while I will start each week with some lecture, the expectation is that your thoughts and opinions will guide the broader direction of the lesson.

I do want to emphasize that some of the readings are challenging! I do not expect you to get/remember every detail. Still, you should come to class with an understanding of the major takeaways from each reading, the questions you had after reading the piece, and some initial thoughts on where you agree/disagree. I strongly recommend taking reading notes to help with studying for exams.

I realize that adjusting to college is difficult. I also realize that you don't stop being people simply because you are students, and personal and extenuating circumstances may arise that will mean you need additional accommodations. I am willing to grant extensions in cases of personal or family emergencies. However, you must ask for an extension at least 24 hours before the assignment is due. We will then work out a new deadline to account for the personal emergency, which you must abide by. Though I'll be flexible on deadlines if something extreme happens, I cannot ignore TCNJ's deadlines for turning in grades at the end of the semester. In all other circumstances, lateness will result in 5% taken off the grade for the assignment per additional day late. All assignments are due by 11:59 p.m..

Grade Breakdown:

Class Participation: 20%

This class is discussion-based, which means you must contribute to get credit! Participation can mean many things, from asking substantive questions about the material to summarizing small group discussions for the class. To ensure a rich classroom discussion, please complete all readings for the week by class on Monday.

When participating in class discussions, I expect everyone to listen to previous comments and actively respond to each other's points. Everyone comes into this classroom with a different background and set of experiences, and I hope to create a learning environment where everyone can grow their critical thinking skills and can discuss each other's ideas in a constructive manner. The study of American government can often require active discussion about difficult or contentious topics. My goal is to foster a classroom environment where everyone assumes best intent from others and reflects on how their perspectives and biases shape their opinions. I will do my best to model these expectations and will expect them from you as well.

You must come to class to get credit for participating. **You have one unexcused; no questions asked absence that you can use at any time without notifying me.** After that, if you are unable to attend a class, you must email me the day before. Unless it's medical, a personal/family emergency, or a TCNJ recognized excused absence (e.g. religious observances or school sponsored activities), you should assume that your absence is unexcused. I will not expect a doctor's note for medical absences, but may change this policy if it is overused.

Two In-Class Exams: 40%

Two during the semester, as indicated in the schedule below, you will have an in-class test on the course readings and discussion. These exams will consist of definitions, short-answer, and a 3-5 paragraph in-class essay. Topics for these exams will come directly from material that has already been assigned for homework and discussed in class. The purpose of these tests is to ensure that students have a comprehensive understanding of the main concepts in the course material and can make connections across topics and themes. These tests are not cumulative.

Reading Questions and Current Events: 6%

At three times in the semester, you must submit a question about the readings or a link to a current news story from a reputable source (e.g. New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, NPR, etc.) via Canvas. The question or news article must be directly related to the readings being discussed in class this week. You must submit your question or article by 11:59 p.m. the night before the first class of the week. Your submission should include either the title of the news article and a link **OR** a question you had about the readings at the top of the page. You must then write one 4-6 sentence paragraph explaining how your question or the article you found connected to the major themes of the readings that week. In addition to discussing the readings for the week, you may also include connections to course material from previous weeks. This paragraph should demonstrate a thorough and comprehensive reading of the material for that week. Each paragraph is worth 2 points, for a total of 6 points throughout the semester.

Campus Engagement Extra Credit: 3%

The campus engagement grade requires that you attend two Politics Forums or other social science talks on campus and write a one-page summary and commentary on each talk. Turn this in on Canvas within one week of the talk. If you are attending a talk outside of the Politics Forum, please check with me first.

Final Paper: 30%

The final paper for this course will encourage you to evaluate the state of American democracy, given the topics discussed throughout the semester. It should be 8-10 pages long and will be worth 30% of your final grade. You will be evaluated on how clearly you explain the concepts from the course that you are incorporating, on the quality of your thesis and how well you support it with evidence, whether you clearly answer the essay question, and the overall strength of your writing (including citing your sources). This essay will be due one week after the last day of classes. **It is not possible to revise the final essay for this course, but you are strongly encouraged to meet with me in office hours in advance of the due date to discuss your paper.**

Your goal with this paper is to use the readings, as well as class discussion and current events, to make a carefully constructed argument about how democratic the U.S. is, where you see its strengths and weaknesses, when it became a democracy, and what reforms you would propose to improve the lasting health of American democracy. You must select three topics from throughout the course and make an argument about each of them separately, but a particularly strong essay will build a central argument that each of the topics ultimately supports and will demonstrate an ability to draw connections across weeks of the course. At least one of the topics you select must come from weeks 1-6 (political structures), one from weeks 8-10 (political institutions), and one from 11-15 (opinion and behaviors). You should also use at least one example from recent events to support your argument and demonstrate how some of the topics from the course work in practice. A particularly strong essay will use 2-3 examples from recent events.

A Note About Grading:

The final grade breakdowns for this class are as follows: A (93-100), A- (90-92), B+ (87-89), B (83-86), B- (80-82), C+ (77-79), C (73-76), C- (70-72), D+ (67-69), D (63-66), D- (60-62), F (Below a 60)

You are always welcome to speak with me to get more information about why you received the grade you did and what you can do to improve on future assignments.

Course Required Materials:

There is one required textbook for this course, which is available for free download in the link below. In the syllabus, the textbook is called K+W. All other readings are specified below and will be available on Canvas.

- [Krutz, G. and Waskiewicz, S. \(2017\) American Government, OpenStax](#)

Schedule for Lecture and Readings:

Assume all readings should be completed by class on Monday unless otherwise specified.

WEEK ONE: Introduction to the Course

- No readings due. Review the syllabus on Canvas before class.

WEEK TWO: What is Government? What is Democracy? (September 5th and 7th)

- K+W Chapter One.
- [“An inspiring conversation about democracy with Danielle Allen,”](#) from the podcast “Vox’s The Gray Area” (For class listen from the 2:08 mark to 17:44, although you’re of course welcome to listen to the entire podcast)
- Robert Mickey, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, Foreign Affairs: Is America still safe for democracy? Why the United States is in danger of backsliding

WEEK THREE: Foundations of U.S. Political System (September 11th and 14th)

- K+W Chapter Two
- James Madison: Federalist Papers 10 and 51
- Nikole Hannah-Jones, The New York Times: [Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.](#)

WEEK FOUR: Federalism (September 18th and 21st)

- K+W Chapter Three
- Jamila Michener: Fragmented Democracy Medicaid, Federalism, and Unequal Politics – Chapters One and Two

WEEK FIVE: Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (September 25th and 28th)

- K+W Chapters Four and Five
- Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail
- Jelani Cobb, The New Yorker: [The Matter of Black Lives](#)

WEEK SIX: Political Representation (October 2nd and 5th)

- **FOR OCTOBER 2nd:**
 - o Jane Mansbridge: Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent "Yes"
- **FOR OCTOBER 5th:**
 - o NPR's Code Switch: [The implications of the case against ICWA](#)
 - o Erin Blakemore, National Geographic: [Why Puerto Rico has debated U.S. statehood since its colonization](#)
 - o Yarimar Bonilla, New York Times: [For Puerto Ricans, Another Reminder That We Are Second-Class Citizens](#)

WEEK SEVEN: FIRST EXAM (October 12th)

- No readings because you will take your first test this week. This in-class test will cover material from weeks 1-5 of the course. There is no class on October 9th because of fall break.

WEEK EIGHT: Congress (October 16th and 19th)

- K+W Chapter Eleven
- Mike Gallagher, The Atlantic: [How to Salvage Congress](#)
- Jamelle Bouie: [Why It Matters That the Jan. 6 Hearings Put ‘a War Scene’ on Display](#)

WEEK NINE: Presidency (October 23rd and 26th)

- K+W Chapter Twelve
- William Howell and Terry Moe, [American Prospect: America’s antiquated constitution](#)
- Erin Peterson, Harvard Law Bulletin: [Presidential Power Surges](#)

WEEK TEN: The Courts (October 30th and November 2nd)

- K+W Chapter Thirteen
- [NPR’s More Perfect: The Imperfect Plaintiffs](#)
- [Joshua Zeitz, Politico: The Supreme Court Has Never Been Apolitical](#)

WEEK ELEVEN: SECOND EXAM and PUBLIC OPINION (November 6th and 9th)

- **FOR NOVEMBER 6th:**
 - o No readings because you will take your second test this week. This in-class test will cover material from weeks 8-10 of the course.
- **FOR NOVEMBER 9th:**
 - o K+W Chapter Six
 - o [Nate Silver, FiveThirtyEight: Change Doesn’t Usually Come This Fast](#)
 - o Nate Silver, FiveThirtyEight: [The Death Of Polling Is Greatly Exaggerated](#)
 - And [a Response](#) from Nate Cohn, New York Times (via “X”)

WEEK TWELVE: Participation and Elections (November 13th and 16th)

- K+W Chapter Seven
- Alan Gerber et al: How Large and Long-lasting Are the Persuasive Effects of Televised Campaign Ads? Results from a Randomized Field Experiment
- German Lopez, Vox: [A new study finds voter ID laws don’t reduce voter fraud — or voter turnout](#)
- Vann R. Newkirk II, The Atlantic: [Voter Suppression Is Warping Democracy](#)

WEEK THIRTEEN: In-Class Paper Workshop (November 20th)

- No readings for this week. Instead, come to class with a proposed topic for your final paper.

WEEK FOURTEEN: Parties and Interest Groups (November 27th and 30th)

- K+W Chapters Nine and Ten
- Martin Gilens and Benjamin I Page: Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens
- Jamelle Bouie, New York Times: [Why Andrew Yang’s New Third Party is Bound to Fail](#)

WEEK FIFTEEN: Media and Wrap-Up (December 4th and 7th)

- K+W Chapter Eight

- Sean Iyengar and Don Kinder: News that Matters: Television and American Opinion Chapter 3
- [Ezra Klein, Vox: Something is breaking American politics, but it's not social media](#)

END OF SEMESTER ESSAY DUE DECEMBER 14th

Additional Information:

Many of the TCNJ policies and resources can be found at [this link](#) to the TCNJ website.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

My experience has been that plagiarism is extremely rare. However, out of fairness to all students behaving ethically, I have absolutely no tolerance for any type of cheating, including plagiarism. The best way to ensure you are not plagiarizing is to cite all of your sources. Ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism or cheating does not provide an excuse or justification for engaging in such behavior. To familiarize yourself with these issues, you should read TCNJ's [Academic Integrity Policy](#).

CANVAS

I will post a Canvas announcement on Friday of each week, going over the material for the following week, along with any updates or announcements you will need before class on Monday. It is your responsibility to set up your Canvas notifications so that you receive these in your inbox, or make sure you check the Canvas announcements page each week on Friday after 5:00 PM.

COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, ACCESS, AND BELONGING

The TCNJ community is composed of people with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences, and the college is committed to diversity, equity, inclusion, access and belonging. The college's [Campus Diversity Statement](#) can be viewed here.

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT & COMMITMENT TO STUDENT SUCCESS, SAFETY, AND WELL-BEING

The TCNJ community is dedicated to the success, safety and well-being of each student. TCNJ strictly follows key policies that govern all TCNJ community members rights and responsibilities in and out of the classroom. In addition, TCNJ has established several student support offices that can provide the support and resources to help students achieve their personal and professional goals and to promote health and well-being. You can find more information about these policies and resources at the "[TCNJ Student Support Resources and Classroom Policies](#)" webpage here. Students who anticipate and/or experience barriers in this course are encouraged to contact the instructor as early in the semester as possible. The Accessibility Resource Center (ARC) is available to facilitate the removal of barriers and to ensure reasonable accommodations. For more information about ARC, please visit [the ARC website](#).

EMAIL POLICY:

I will reply to emails that I receive during regular working hours (i.e., Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 5 PM) as soon as possible, often the same day. For emails received outside of those working hours, I will generally reply during the next working day. **This policy also applies to emails sent the day an assignment is due. If you have a question about an assignment, it is always best to ask it at least one day in advance.**

IT SUPPORT:

If you have technology issues or needs during the semester, please contact the IT Helpdesk at 609-771-2660 or helpdesk@tcnj.edu.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING:

Adjusting to college is difficult and I know that many of you may be struggling with issues of mental health and wellbeing. Please also know that if you are having difficulties that are impacting your ability to succeed in this course, you should feel free to contact me to figure out what steps to take to address these issues.

If you or someone you know feels overwhelmed, depressed, and/or in need of support, here is some information about the available resources. Request help if [you are in crisis](#), or if you are [concerned about a friend](#), report [discrimination or harassment](#), or request [counseling or psychological services](#).

OFFICE HOURS:

Office hours are held in person in my office (Social Sciences 239) on Mondays and Thursdays from 9:30-10:50 a.m. In person office hours are by appointment and you can sign up at the link at the top of the syllabus. If these times do not work for you, because of a class conflict, you may reach out to me directly.

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS:

Students with documented disabilities who require academic accommodations should notify me and contact Disability Support Services (609-771-3199). Accommodations are individualized and in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992. A link is available [here](#).