

POLSCI 116D: Introduction to American Politics

Fall 2025

Class:

- Tu/Th 3:05-4:20pm, Allen 326

Instructor:	Jon Geen (Professor)	Kristina Mensik (TA)
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Office Hours:	W 4-5, F 2-3, or by appointment Gross Hall 294H	By appointment TKTK

Course Description

Political scientists commonly refer to politics as society's mechanism for determining who gets what. This course addresses questions concerning how politics works in the United States. Why does the United States have its system of government, how can we evaluate whether it is working as intended, and how might we change it? What is public opinion, and how does it bear on public policy? How do people decide whether to vote and who to vote for? In short, how do we determine who gets what in the United States?

This is an introductory course. The answers it will provide to these questions (and many others) will be broader than they are deep. Students who are successful in this course will have a foundation for further study in more advanced political science courses. More importantly, they will be better equipped to understand, navigate, and participate in U.S. politics in their daily lives.

This is a political science course, not a venue for debating current political events. This distinction is important. There will be dedicated time for structured debate in class, but this will be geared toward course concepts such as institutional design, coalition formation, and interest group pluralism rather than serving as a platform for your personal takes on hot-button issues. This is not to discourage you from having hot takes! This is to encourage you to find other platforms for them, ranging from informal discussions with friends and acquaintances to the pages of the *Chronicle*.

Office Hours

Office hours are time formally set aside for you to ask questions about course material, assignments, or anything else you think is relevant. While I prefer that you use the listed in-person

office hours if possible, you are welcome to email me to set up an alternative appointment if necessary.

Course Text

I ask that you rent or purchase the following reader, which we will use throughout the course. All other course materials will be posted on Canvas.

- Kollman, Ken. *Readings in American Politics, Sixth Edition*
 - Physical copies should be available at the bookstore
 - The e-book can be purchased at the following link:
<https://digital.wwnorton.com/readingsamerpol6>

If you are having difficulty with costs associated with this course, Duke makes the following relevant resources available:

- Contact the [financial aid office](#) (whether or not you are on aid) for information on loans or connections to other resources on campus that could help alleviate these costs.
- DukeLIFE offers [course materials assistance](#) for eligible students. Students who are eligible for DukeLIFE benefits are notified prior to the beginning of the semester.

Evaluation

Your final grade for the semester will be a weighted average of the following components (weights in parentheses):

Attendance and Preparation (50%)

There is an [accumulating](#) body of [evidence](#), supported by strong theoretical intuitions, that consistently reading the assigned material and attending class are the two strongest correlates of learning. This course is designed to structure your incentives accordingly.

- Toward the end of each class, I will post a short quiz based on the material for that day. In order to receive credit for this quiz, you must turn in a *physical copy* of your answers as you exit class.
 - Because you must turn in a physical copy, you should come to class with scratch paper and something to write with.
 - Because these quizzes count as attendance for lecture, they cannot be rescheduled.
- Each quiz is worth two points. The first point is for turning it in (i.e. the attendance component). The second point is for how well you do on the quiz itself. So for example, turning in a quiz and getting 4/5 points on the substance is worth $(1 + 0.8)/2$ points, or 90%.
- Before calculating your final grade, I will drop quizzes associated with:

- Excused absences
- No more than one unexcused absence (see attendance policy below)
- The two lowest remaining quiz grades

Essays (30%)

This course is divided into three sections: Foundations, Institutions, and the Public. At the beginning of each, I will provide you with an essay prompt relevant to that section. At the end of each, you will turn in an essay (word limit: 1,000, not including references) responding to that prompt and schedule a 15 minute oral defense where you will answer questions about what you wrote. Your grade will be based on a combination of the content of your essay and your answers in the oral defense. Each of these essays will be worth 10% of your final grade for the course.

Final Exam (20%)

This exam will be held during our scheduled exam period, and will consist of a mixture of multiple choice and short response questions designed to assess your cumulative mastery of the course material.

Due Dates

- Essay 1: September 30th
- Essay 2: October 28th
- Essay 3: December 5th
- Final Exam: Saturday, December 13th, 9am-12pm

Reading and Course Materials

With the exception of the reader, all readings and audio/visual course materials will be posted on Canvas.

I expect you to read, listen to, and/or watch a non-trivial amount of material on your own in order to prepare for class. However, being prepared does not necessarily mean that you have read every page of the material in full depth. Reading quizzes will be designed to test your understanding of core arguments and concepts, *not* your memory of specific facts that appear on specific pages. Approach the material with this in mind. Reading strategically is an important skill that I encourage you to develop in this course.

Some of the material listed here is marked as optional. This means that you are not accountable for it in your assignments or exams, but I think it provides an interesting complement to the material you are accountable for and is therefore worth checking out if you have time.

Course Schedule

This course is divided into three parts: Foundations, Institutions, and the Public. Each week covers a discrete topic. Lecture dates are in parentheses.

Part 1: Foundations

- Week 1 (August 26/28): Introduction
 - August 26: No assigned reading
 - August 28:
 - * Hersh, Eitan. "Politics is for Power, Not Consumption." *Boston Review*, November 4, 2019. ([Link](#)).
 - * Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. 2025. "The Path to American Authoritarianism." *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2025. ([Link](#)).
- Week 2 (September 2/4): Democratic Citizenship and Collective Action
 - September 2: **Essay prompt 1 posted**
 - * Kollman, Chapter 1.3: Robert Dahl, from *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*
 - * W.E.B. Dubois, 1920. "Of the Ruling of Men" ([Link](#)).
 - * (WATCH) The social contract (Khan Academy) ([Link](#)).
 - September 4:
 - * Mansbridge, Jane. 2014. "What is Political Science For?" *Perspectives on Politics* 12(1): 8-17.
 - * Matthews, Dylan. "Did a 1982 book predict America's decline?" Vox, October 2, 2022. (Archived PDF on Canvas).
- Week 3 (September 9/11): The Constitution
 - September 9:
 - * Roche, John P. 1961. "The Founding Fathers: A Reform Caucus in Action." *American Political Science Review* 55(4): 799-816.
 - * *The Federalist Papers*, 10 ([Link](#)) and 51 ([Link](#))
 - September 11:
 - * Kollman, Chapter 2.1: Brutus, The Antifederalist, No. 1
 - * Kollman, Chapter 2.2: Robert Dahl, from *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* (2001)
 - * Linz, Juan. 1990. "The Perils of Presidentialism." *Journal of Democracy* 1(1): 51-69.
 - * OPTIONAL:
 - Trende, Sean. "It's Time to Increase the Size of the House." Sabato's Crystal Ball, March 6, 2014 ([Link](#))
- Week 4 (September 16/18): Federalism
 - September 16:

- * Kollman, Chapter 3.1: William Riker, from *Federalism: Origin, Operation, Significance* (1964)
- * Fertig, Natalie. "The Great American cannabis experiment." *Politico*, August 14, 2019 ([Link](#)).
- * (WATCH) Federalism: Crash Course Government and Politics #4 ([Link](#)).
- September 18:
 - * Frymer, Paul. 2014. "'A Rush and a Push and the Land Is Ours': Territorial Expansion, Land Policy, and U.S. State Formation." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(1): 119-144.
 - * Grumbach, Jacob, and Jamila Michener. 2022. "American Federalism, Political Inequality, and Democratic Erosion." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 699, 143-155.
- Week 5 (September 23/25): Civil Liberties and Civil Rights
 - September 23:
 - * Spencer, Saranac. "Due Process and the Abrego Garcia Case." FactCheck.org, April 23, 2025. ([Link](#)).
 - * Fernando, Christine. "How covering your face became a constitutional matter: Mask debate tests free speech rights." Associated Press, June 23, 2025. ([Link](#)).
 - * (WATCH) "The Eighth Amendment: Cruel and Unusual Punishment." Annenberg Classroom ([Link](#)).
 - * OPTIONAL:
 - White, Ken. "In Defense of Free Speech Pedantry: Why You Should Clarify Which Free Speech Value You're Debating." December 18, 2022. ([Link](#)).
 - (WATCH) Killer Mike. "Free Speech Lets Me Know My Enemy." Keynote Address, 2023 FIRE Gala. ([Link](#)).
 - September 25:
 - * Kollman, Chapter 4.3: Andrew Lewis, from *The Rights Turn in Conservative Christian Politics: How Abortion Transformed the Culture Wars* (2017)
 - * Kollman, Chapter 4.4: Vesla Weaver and Gwen Prowse, "Racial Authoritarianism in U.S. Democracy." (2020)
 - * McConaughy, Corrine. "Forget Susan B. Anthony." *The Monkey Cage*, March 31, 2014. ([Link](#)).
 - * OPTIONAL:
 - Sullivan, Andrew. "Here Comes the Groom." *The New Republic*, August 28, 1989 ([Link](#)).
 - Bouie, Jamelle. "Making Voting Constitutional." *The American Prospect*, January 30, 2013 ([Link](#)).

Part 2: Institutions

- Week 6 (September 30/October 2): Congress

- September 30: **Essay 1 due, essay prompt 2 posted**
 - * Kollman, Chapter 5.1: David Mayhew, from *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (1974)
 - * Glassman, Matt. "You don't hate Congress. You hate losing." Matt's Five Points, May 16, 2024. ([Link](#)).
 - * Glassman, Matt. "There are Majorities and then there are Hellbent Majorities." Matt's Five Points, April 4, 2025. ([Link](#)).
- October 2:
 - * Lee, Frances. 2016. *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign*, Chapters 2 and 3.
 - NOTE: Read the PDF on Canvas, not the excerpt in Kollman, as I want to cover more from this book than is included in the reader.
 - * Furnas, Alexander, and Timothy LaPira. "Congressional Brain Drain: Legislative Capacity in the 21st Century." New America Foundation, September 8, 2020. ([Link](#)).
- Week 7 (October 7/9): The Executive Branch (Presidency)
 - October 7:
 - * Kollman, Chapter 6.1. Richard Neustadt, from *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (1991)
 - * Kollman, Chapter 6.4: William Howell, from *Power without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action* (2003)
 - * (LISTEN) Farewell Address, Dwight Eisenhower. January 17, 1961. ([Link](#)).
 - October 9:
 - * Seitz, Samuel, and Caitlin Talmadge. 2020. "The Predictable Hazards of Unpredictability: Why Madman Behavior Doesn't Work." *The Washington Quarterly* 43(3): 31-46.
 - * Naidu, Suresh. "Columbia's Administrators are Fooling Themselves." *New York Times*, July 23, 2025 (Archived PDF on Canvas)
 - * Goldsmith, Jack. "An Authority to License Illegal Conduct." *Executive Functions*, July 3, 2025. ([Link](#)).
- Week 8 (October 14/16): The Executive Branch (Bureaucracy)
 - October 14: No class (Fall break)
 - October 16:
 - * Pahlka, Jennifer. "The Water is a Mirror." *Eating Policy*, April 1, 2025. ([Link](#))
 - * Fremstad, Shawn. "The official U.S. poverty rate is based on a hopelessly out-of-date metric." *Washington Post*, September 16, 2019. (Archived PDF on Canvas)
 - * Taer, Jennie. "Trump admin's 3,000 ICE arrests per day quota is taking focus off criminals and 'killing morale': insiders." *New York Post*, June 17, 2025. ([Link](#)).
 - * (LISTEN) The scourge of the "time tax." *The Weeds*. May 17, 2022. ([Link](#)).

- * OPTIONAL:
 - Rutherford, Fiona. "Why the US Has Fewer Sunscreen Options Than Europe." Bloomberg, June 23, 2022. ([Link](#)).
 - (LISTEN) Fraud levels are a policy choice. *Complex Systems with Patrick McKenzie*. December 5, 2024. ([Link](#)).
 - Weatherby, Leif. 2025. "Our Spreadsheet Overlords." The Ideas Letter (41) ([Link](#)).
- Week 9 (October 21/23): The Judiciary
 - October 21:
 - * Brennan, William. 1985. "The Constitution of the United States: Contemporary Ratification."
 - * Scalia, Antonin. 1988. "Originalism: The Lesser Evil."
 - October 23:
 - * Lemley, Michael. 2022. "The Imperial Supreme Court." *Harvard Law Review* 136: 97-118.
 - * Biskupic, Joan. "A secret deal between Justices John Roberts and Anthony Kennedy on gay rights and what it means today." CNN, March 30, 2023 ([Link](#)).
 - * Chemerinsky, Erwin. "Why the shadow docket should concern us all." SCOTUS-Blog, August 4, 2025 ([Link](#)).

Part 3: The Public

- Week 10 (October 28/30): Public Opinion
 - October 28: **Essay Review 2 due, essay prompt 3 posted**
 - * Morris, G. Elliott. "How much should politicians (and pundits) follow the polls?" Strength in Numbers, May 27, 2025. (Archived PDF on Canvas).
 - * Feldman, Stanley, and John Zaller. 1992. "The Political Culture of Ambivalence: Ideological Responses to the Welfare State." *American Journal of Political Science* 36(1): 268-307.
 - * (LISTEN) "How Does the Public Move Right When Policy Moves Left?" Science of Politics podcast, February 23 2022. ([Link](#)).
 - October 30:
 - * Kollman, Chapter 9.1: John Zaller, from *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992)
 - * Cohn, Nate. "How One Polling Decision Is Leading to Two Distinct Stories of the Election." *New York Times*, The Tilt. October 6, 2024 ([Link](#)).
- Week 11 (November 4/6): Political Parties
 - November 4:
 - * Bawn, Kathleen, et al. 2012. "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 10(3): 571-597.

- * Kollman, Chapter 12.4: Lee Drutman, from *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multi-Party Democracy in America* (2019)
- November 6:
 - * Ziblatt, Daniel, and Steven Levitsky. 2018. *How Democracies Die*, Chapters 2 and 3
 - * Finkel, Eli, et al. 2020. "Political sectarianism in America." *Science* 370(6516): 533-537
- Week 12 (November 11/13): Elections
 - November 11:
 - * Kollman, Chapter 13.4: Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, from *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*
 - * Popkin, Samuel. 1991. *The Reasoning Voter*, pages 1-17
 - * (WATCH) Why Democracy is Mathematically Impossible (Veritasium) ([Link](#)).
 - November 13:
 - * Vavreck, Lynn. *The Message Matters: The Economy and Presidential Campaigns*, Chapters 2 and 3
 - * (LISTEN) "Did Americans' Racial Attitudes Elect Trump?" Science of Politics podcast, February 23 2022. ([Link](#)).
- Week 13 (November 18/20): Interest Groups
 - November 18:
 - * Baylor, Christopher. 2013. "First to the Party: The Group Origins of the Partisan Transformation on Civil Rights, 1940–1960." *Studies in American Political Development* 27: 111–141.
 - * Della Costa, Anna Maria, and Vaughan, Dawn Baumgartner. "Who decides when kids start school? Some NC districts are in open revolt." *Durham Herald-Sun*, August 16, 2023. ([Link](#)).
 - November 20:
 - * Han, Hahrie. "Want Gun Control? Learn from the NRA." *New York Times*, October 4, 2017. (Archived PDF posted on Canvas).
 - * Skocpol, Theda. "The Narrowing of Civic Life." *The American Prospect*, May 17, 2004. ([Link](#)).
 - * (WATCH) "United in Anger: A History of ACT UP" ([Link](#)).
- Week 14 (November 25/27): No class (Thanksgiving Break 11/25-11/30)
- Week 15 (December 2/4): The Media
 - December 2:
 - * Prior, Markus. 2005. "News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 49(3): 577-592.

- * Newman, Nic, et al. "Reuters Digital News Report 2025." Sections 1 and 2 (pages 10-35). ([Link](#)).
- December 4: **Essay 3 due on December 5**
 - * Darr, Joshua. "Local News Coverage Is Declining — And That Could Be Bad For American Politics." *FiveThirtyEight*, June 2, 2021. ([Link](#)).
 - * Grinspan, Jon. "How a 19th-century news revolution sparked activists, influencers, disinformation, and the Civil War." *Nieman Lab*, October 10, 2024. ([Link](#)).

Course Policies

Attendance

You are expected to attend class and be prepared to engage with the course material (see the Evaluation section). Excused absences must be requested in writing with reasonable advance notice. Duke policies outline personal emergencies, illnesses, varsity athletic competition, and religious observances as acceptable reasons for an excused absence, and I am willing to consider additional reasons that do not fall neatly into these categories.

In addition to excused absences, you are allowed one unexcused absence. This is designed to give you flexibility in cases where you have a reason to miss class that wouldn't otherwise be excused. If excused absences are analogous to "sick days," this unexcused absence is your "vacation day." Maybe there's an interesting speaker on campus whose talk conflicts with class. Maybe your club is going on a trip. Maybe you need to study for a test or finish a project for another class. *Maybe you just need some rest.* Whether and how to use this flexibility is entirely up to you.

Deadlines and Late Work

Due dates for this class are set where they are for a reason, and you are expected to turn assignments in on time. That said, things happen, and there may be good reasons why you need to move a deadline. These reasons can range from serious unexpected circumstances to simply having a lot of other work for other classes due at the same time. Extensions must be requested in writing with reasonable advance notice; how far in advance is reasonable depends on how urgent the reason. If you know a due date conflicts with work for another class well in advance, you shouldn't wait until the day before that due date to request an extension.

Written assignments turned in after a deadline (original or extended) will be marked down 1/3 of a letter grade for every day they are late. So for instance, if a deadline is 5:00pm on a Thursday, an assignment turned in at 5:01pm on that Thursday that would otherwise receive an A will receive an A-; if it is turned in at 5:01pm the next day, it will receive a B+; and so on.

Class Discussions

When you enroll in this class, you become colleagues with everyone else who is enrolled in it. Colleagues frequently disagree, but they do so without being disagreeable.

You are expected to engage with each others' views and perspectives respectfully both inside and outside of the classroom. Even (especially) when you disagree, it is essential to approach this disagreement amicably, with an assumption of good faith, because you are colleagues and not opponents.

Of course it should go without saying, but assumptions of good faith and expectations of mutual respect are not licenses to engage in exclusionary language that is inherently disrespectful.

Grading

If you feel that a grade you receive on an assignment does not reflect the quality of the work you submitted, you may email to request clarification or reconsideration. The email must include, either in the body or as an attachment, a rationale for why the request is warranted. This means explicitly engaging with any substantive feedback you received and making a case (with reference to any provided grading criteria, such as a rubric) why the grade you received does not align with that substantive feedback.

Writing

Written work should be proofread for spelling and grammar, arguments should be supported by reliable evidence, and all references must be appropriately cited. *I do not care what citation format you use as long as you pick one and use it consistently.* I strongly encourage you to familiarize yourself with a citation management tool – my personal recommendation would be Zotero because it's free and easily integrates with Microsoft Word and Google Docs – that will make this easier when you need to compile a bibliography. You are also welcome to consult myself or the University's writing center for general writing advice.

Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty is when you present someone else's ideas as your own. Students are strongly encouraged to learn from one another through discussions both in and outside of class, so long as completed work reflects their own intellectual labor. This means that when you submit work with your name on it and no one else's, you did the work that produced the document. All ideas and claims included in written work that are not your own should be appropriately cited.

You may use large language models to aid your work – such as by finding sources (provided you track down the actual sources rather than taking model generated output at face value) or proofreading your writing – but you may not use these models to replace your work. Presenting large language model output as your own intellectual labor is, in the scholarly and philosophical sense of the term, [bullshit](#), and will be considered academic dishonesty. The purpose of assigned work in this course (and in college more broadly) is to strengthen your ability to develop and communicate ideas of your own. Much in the same way that your cardiovascular endurance would fade if you started driving your daily running route, your ability to think for yourself will fade if you rely on language models to do your work for you.

Duke takes the issue of academic honesty very seriously. Any student who appears to violate the University's [Academic Dishonesty Policy](#) may be referred to the University's Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards. Academic dishonesty on any aspect of course work will result in failure of the course.

Support Services

Academic Support Services

Political Science Librarian: Ryan Denniston (ryan.denniston@duke.edu) is Duke's librarian for Public Policy and Political Science. In addition to myself, you are welcome to email Ryan with questions as you working on writing assignments for the course.

The Writing Studio: I encourage you to visit the Writing Studio where you will find a place beyond our classroom to work collaboratively with an attentive, non-evaluative reader. You can visit at any stage in your writing process, including before you have even started writing. Visit <http://twp.duke.edu/twp-writing-studio> to schedule a face-to-face or online appointment and to learn more about Studio resources.

The Academic Resource Center: The ARC provides academic support and programming for all Duke undergraduates. Their services include one-on-one consultations and peer tutoring, and they work alongside the Student Disability Access Office to serve students with diagnosed learning disabilities. Their programs include opportunities for students to study together in structured groups ("learning communities"), as well as workshops offered throughout the semester. Further information and resources are available on [their website](#).

Accommodation and Inclusion

Student Disability Access Office: If you have any physical, cognitive, or psychiatric needs that require accommodations for this course, please contact the Student Disability Access Office (if you haven't already) as soon as possible. The SDAO will work with you to determine appropriate accommodations. Please contact them by email at sdao@duke.edu or visit <https://access.duke.edu/students> for more information.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS): Each of you will face some level of challenge during your time at Duke – whether it be a challenge like procrastination, or a more profound challenge that impairs your ability to function. The CAPS staff includes psychologists, clinical social workers, and psychiatrists experienced in working with college-age adults. Information about their services and workshops is available [here](#).

The Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity: This center provides education, advocacy, support, mentoring, academic engagement, and space LGBTQIA+ students, staff, and faculty at Duke. The Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity also serves and supports Duke alumni/ae and the greater LGBTQIA+ community. Further information and resources are available on their [website](#).

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 protects individuals from sex or gender-based discrimination, including discrimination based on gender-identity, in educational programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. It applies to all aspects of employment and education programs and activities at Duke University.

If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, options a complete list of confidential and non-confidential reporting options and resources both on- and off-campus can be found on the Office of Institutional Equity's [website](#). Faculty members and instructors are considered "responsible employees" at Duke University, meaning they are required to report all allegations of sex or gender-based discrimination.

Acknowledgments

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