

# PS 200: American Political Process

Fall 2016

10-10:50 MW

332 Cathedral of Learning

Professor Kanthak

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Office hours: 1-3 Wed, and by appointment

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Office hours:

The goal of this course is to use the backdrop of American politics to get you to think like a social scientist. We are going to be discussing and assessing some of the important controversies in politics today, but we will do so through the lens of political science. Political scientists have learned a lot about how the political world works since Aristotle invented the discipline, and you will learn how to apply what we know as political scientists to better understand the world around you. For example, you will learn that “Why *do* people vote?” is probably a better question than “Why *don’t* people vote?” You’ll learn why so-called “gridlock” in American government probably means the system is working just as it should. You’ll learn how public opinion may or may not translate to policy outcomes. What we won’t do is rehash everything you learned in high school civics class. If you signed up for this class because you figured you could just regurgitate what you already know and do just fine, you’ve been warned.

Almost everything you believe about politics, you’ve been set up to believe since you were a little kid, either because you were raised in a particular environment or because you inherited it (seriously – political scientists are studying this right now). In other words, your long-term political views, like it or not, come from your family. And mine come from mine. In other words, this is not a “received wisdom from the professor” kind of course. It works only if you actively engage with your colleagues and are willing to put your own deeply held beliefs to scrutiny. So everything is up for questioning and discussing in this class.<sup>1</sup> If I thought I *could* indoctrinate you with my political views, believe me, I’d try. But I don’t think I can, so I won’t try. What I will try to do is help you to acquire (or hone) the tools necessary to articulate your political views in a way that is both constructive for you and persuasive to others. I can’t change your political views, but together, we can learn a bit more about how politics works in a way that just might end up challenging those views. You may decide that your views are just fine. Or, you may decide that your deeply-

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<sup>1</sup> Note: There are two important exceptions to this rule. First, Han shot first. Second, the narration in Blade Runner is superfluous and annoying. Everything else, though, is up for debate.

<sup>2</sup> Note that this is sarcasm, and you are expected to recognize sarcasm even if I don’t add a little emoticon happy face.

<sup>3</sup> Note that I have reached out to the office of Congressman Mike Doyle to attempt to

held beliefs are contradictory or just plain nonsensical. Like the genetic predisposition to alcoholism or the tendency to gain weight around the waist, you can do something about a genetic predisposition to political views that don't make sense, if you determine that they are unhealthy.

### **Books**

One book is required for this course. They have been ordered at the book store, but are also available at various online outlets. Be sure to get the correct edition of the books.

Kollman, The American Political System, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (core, with 2014 election addition)

### **Course requirements**

OK, fine, whatever. But the thing is, where does my *grade* come from?

Clearly, this kind of question is antithetical to *the intellectual environment I am trying to create here*. It is a bad question, and you should feel bad for asking it.<sup>2</sup> But I shall tell you anyway. Your grade will be determined straightforwardly in the following way:

Midterm exam I:	20 percent
Midterm exam II:	20 percent
Final exam:	30 percent
Discussion participation:	15 percent
Writing assignments:	15 percent

Examinations: This course will have three examinations: two midterms and a final. All exams will be multiple choice. The midterms will have 40 questions each and the final will have 80 questions. The final will be cumulative, with an emphasis on the last third of the class.

Discussion participation: Your TA is responsible for the discussion portion of your grade. You will learn more about your grade in your discussion section.

Writing assignments: There are two different kinds of writing assignments in this class, outlined below. Note that all writing assignments are to be submitted via CourseWeb. The link to submit each assignment will die *precisely* at the time listed below. There is therefore no way for you to submit late work. If you don't get it in by the due date, you don't get it in. Also note that you are responsible for meeting all due dates. You will not, in general, receive reminders to get your work in. The writing assignments are described below:

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<sup>2</sup> Note that this is sarcasm, and you are expected to recognize sarcasm even if I don't add a little emoticon happy face.

- AMA IRL (4 points): Four class periods this semester will be dedicated to Ask Me Anything-type discussions in class. You are expected to submit at least four questions. Deadlines<sup>3</sup> are below:
  - September 9, 9 p.m. (Ayoob/Mayes)
  - September 30, 9 p.m. (McAllister)
  - November 8, 12 midnight (Election)
  - December 6, 9 p.m. (Last Day)
- Weekly response (11 points): This assignment is an opportunity for you to think about the topics we have discussed in a particular week and put those thoughts in writing. The rules are simple. 1) Write in real sentences with real attention to the general rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. 2) Relate it to class. 3) Write more than 100 but less than 250 (or so) words. 4) Make it not boring. Deadlines are most Fridays at 9:00 p.m. Note that this means that on some Fridays, you will have an AMA IRL *and* a response due. You will survive. I promise. See CourseWeb (and the schedule below) for specifics. You can write about whatever you want, but here are some questions to prompt your thinking (feel free to ignore them totally if you have other ideas):
  - What is the most surprising thing you have learned this week?
  - What have you learned that caused you to change your mind about something?
  - How does the class material relate to something you heard in the news?
  - What did you learn that made you happy, mad, sad, or confused?
  - What do you still not get about what we've learned?

### **Course policies**

*Students with disabilities:* If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me and Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, (412)648-7890/(412)383-7355(TTY), as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Beyond that, I have a standard set of policies that are in place for all my classes. These won't generally apply to the sort of person who willingly decides to take on the extra work of enrolling in an honors course. But I'm leaving them on here anyway, just in case:

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<sup>3</sup> Note that I have reached out to the office of Congressman Mike Doyle to attempt to arrange an AMA IRL with him. Sitting Members of Congress are quite busy and so it is unlikely we will be able to arrange one. If we do, these deadlines (and the course schedule) will change. I will make an announcement to that effect in class.

*Grading:* Again, I don't believe in guessing games. I make up fairly detailed grading rubrics for each assignment, and I grade accordingly. You can access these rubrics on CourseWeb.

*Attendance:* Students are responsible for attending class every day and understanding the material for that day. Yes, it *will* be on the test. That said, I will not regularly take attendance. Please do not attend class if you are not willing to pay attention, or at least to pretend to pay attention. (I can, in fact, see that newspaper you are reading.) If you prefer not to engage the material, please feel free to skip the class as much as you like. Doing so will make your work very poor, and therefore much easier for me to assess.

*Cheating:* Don't even try it. Seriously. If I catch you (and I will do everything in my power to catch cheaters), I will follow university procedures for reporting your offense. You will also receive a failing grade for the *course*. Read that last part again: You will fail the course, not just the assignment for which you went over to the Dark Side. You can familiarize yourself with the University of Pittsburgh's Code of Academic Integrity here: <http://www.pitt.edu/~provost/ai1.html>. Know it.

*Late work:* I do not accept late work, nor do I reschedule exams, unless you have a *documented* excuse. If you know you will have trouble getting to the exams or coming to your assigned debate date, you would be wise to drop the class now.

*Incompletes:* It is my policy not to give incompletes. I do so only in rare circumstances, such as a documented illness. (Note: Getting tired of school at the end of the term is not rare, and therefore is not a valid excuse for an incomplete.) Asking for an incomplete except in the direst of circumstances beyond your control only eats away at the precious moments we both have on earth.

*Cheating:* There. I said it again. Seriously, don't do it. I've reported people before and I'll do it again. I firmly believe that the vast majority of students are honest, hard-working folks who wouldn't even think of cheating. And I'll get a real job where I actually have to produce something useful before I undermine the efforts of the honest majority by letting cheaters get away with it. Anyway, you will feel really bad if you have to live with yourself after such deceitful behavior. I don't want that for you. And neither do you.

### **Course schedule**

From time to time, there will be additional, more time-dependent readings for each week. Be sure to check courseweb to make sure you get those readings, too. Note: APS refers to The American Political System by Ken Kollman. Other readings are available at the links below or on courseweb.

- Aug 29: Introductions
- Aug 31: NO CLASS
- Sep 7: Laying the groundwork  
Read APS, Ch. 1  
  
Due: AMA questions (Sep 9, 9p.m.)
- Sep 12: AMA IRL with Pitt alums and DC insiders Eddie Ayoob & Halle Mayes
- Sep 14: Laying the ground work, continued
- Sep 19, 21: The Constitution  
Read APS, Chs. 1 & 2  
  
Due: Response (Sep 16, 9p.m.)
- Sep 26: Federalism  
Read APS, Ch. 3
- Sep 28, Oct 3: Civil rights/ Civil Liberties  
Read APS, Ch. 4  
  
Due: AMA questions (Sep 30, 9p.m.)
- Oct 5: AMA IRL with Lenny McAllister, candidate for PA's 4<sup>th</sup> Cong. District  
  
Due: Response (Oct 7, 9p.m.)
- Oct 10: MIDTERM I
- Oct 12: Elections  
Read APS, Ch. 13  
  
Due: Response (Oct 14, 9p.m.)
- Oct 18, 19: Congress  
Read APS, Ch. 5  
  
Due: AMA questions (Oct 21, 9p.m.)
- Oct 24: AMA IRL with Congressman Mike Doyle of PA's 4<sup>th</sup> Cong. District
- Oct 26, 31: Presidency

Read APS, Ch.6

Due: Response (Oct 28, 9p.m.)

Nov 2: Judiciary

Read APS, Ch. 8

Due: Response (Nov 4, 9p.m.)

Nov 7: MIDTERM II

Due: AMA questions (Nov 8, 9p.m.)

Nov 9: AMA IRL: Election post-mortem

Due: Response (Nov 11, 9p.m.)

Nov 14, 16: Public Opinion  
Read APS, Ch. 9

Due: Response (Nov 18, 9p.m.)

Nov 21: Participation  
Read APS, Ch. 10

Nov 28, 30: Political Parties  
Read APS, Ch. 12

Due: Response (Dec 2, 9p.m.)

Dec 5: Media  
Read APS, Ch. 14

Due: Response (Dec 9, 9p.m.)

Dec 7: AMA IRL: Final review, semester wrap-up