

**Politics in the U.S.
GOVT 110--004
School of Public Affairs
American University
Fall 2019**

M/Th 4:05 PM - 5:20 PM

Classroom: Kerwin 6

Professor Danielle Higgins

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Office Hours: Mondays and Thursdays, 2-3 PM or by appointment

Office Location: MGC 306

Course Information

What We Will Cover in This Course:

How are the political institutions that make up the American system of government supposed to function and how well do they do in fulfilling their intended purposes? What are the various ways in which people are involved in a government that is “of the people, by the people and for the people”? What are the greatest challenges to American democracy and how can we overcome them? Regardless of your political affiliation, many would agree that aspects of the US political system are broken, problematic or need reform. Rather than just diagnose problems, our aim in this class is to uncover solutions and explore how you can be more politically active and engaged.

Intended as a foundational-level course in the Government Department, as well as a General Education course in Foundational Area 4: Social Institutions and Behavior, GOVT 110 has two basic purposes. The first is to introduce you to the US governmental system and to think critically about the organization of US politics and society; topics include the Constitution, federalism and the separation of powers; civil rights and civil liberties; political behavior and mass politics, including public opinion, the media, elections, political parties, and participation; and finally, the institutions of the U.S. government, including the Presidency, federal bureaucracy, Congress, and Judiciary. The second purpose is to introduce you to some of the key ways in which political scientists study American politics. Our focus will be primarily on the former, and class discussions will bring current events to bear on structures of governances and political processes. Through assigned readings and lectures, I will introduce you to a small slice of the most important political science work on these topics and what we can learn through this scholarship.

As part of this course, you will participate in the Washington Lab, an experiential learning program in which you will visit government institutions, political offices, and other sites. The Washington Lab takes advantage of our location in Washington, DC to help you connect what you are learning in the course to the “real-world” of politics. Your TAs— [REDACTED] —have worked very hard to organize these lab sessions and your participation is expected and required.

What You Will Learn:

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Demonstrate a basic understanding of the structure of our government, including its federal nature, protections for civil rights and liberties, the powers of each branch of government, the system of checks and balances, the process of electing representatives, the organization of political parties and the role of special interest groups, the media and citizens in the political process. In-class examinations will evaluate your basic understanding of these concepts.
2. Evaluate how well these formal and informal institutions provide the space and autonomy for individuals, both political elites and ordinary citizens, to affect politics and achieve their goals. In class discussions, we will evaluate the extent to which the operation of American institutions matches their intent and assess the implications of any mismatch between intent and actual operation.
3. Convey coherent analytical arguments about politics in the U.S. in writing and in speech. Written assignments completed both in and outside of class, as well as your participation in group discussions, will develop oral and written communication skills.
4. Locate and employ appropriate empirical evidence to evaluate claims and draw conclusions about phenomena in American politics. Your written assignments, will give you the opportunity to conduct some independent research, will assess your ability to select and effectively utilize appropriate evidence.
5. Come up with innovative solutions to the problems that ail the American political system through a constitutional amendment proposal.

In addition to the specific learning outcomes for this course, the course also develops the following General Education learning outcomes:

- **Diverse perspectives and experiences:** Acquiring knowledge and analytical skills to understand a variety of perspectives and experiences, including those that have emerged from the scholarship on age, disability, ethnicity, gender and gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation, and social class. When we think about how well institutions do or do not function, we will draw on diverse perspectives and experiences to understand the extent to which institutions succeed or fail, and for whom.
- **Innovative thinking:** Venturing beyond established patterns of thought in imaginative and creative ways. We won't just be diagnosing disease; we will be coming up with cures.
- **Critical Inquiry:** Systematic questioning and analysis of problems, issues, and claims. Both in-class discussions and your written assignments, including exams, will assess your critical inquiry skills. While I cannot ask you to abandon your ideology at the door, and I will not grade you on your political beliefs or values, I do ask that you approach your readings and our class discussions with an open mind and always be sure to back any and all claims you make with a clear argument, drawing on empirical evidence when possible.

What to Do When You are Confused:

This material is not easy, and although you are responsible for reviewing the material on your own and preparing for each class, we will go through it together. I strive to answer questions via email as quickly as possible, but I very much prefer speaking with students in office hours, especially if your questions are substantive in nature. Please reach out if you have questions, want to discuss concepts further or for any other reason. There are no bad questions! It is important for me to know when you are lost and what you might be struggling with.

Course Requirements, Assignments and Grading

Required Books

American Government: Stories of a Nation, Brief Edition (2018), Scott Abernathy

All other readings will be posted to Blackboard and many are also linked in the syllabus.

Assignments

Your assignments for this course include a Constitutional amendment proposal (15%), a midterm examination (15%), Senate opposition research assignment (15%), a final exam (25%), participation in the Washington Lab (15%), and class participation (15%).

Constitutional Amendment Proposal (15%). Due Monday, 9/23. Instructions will be posted on Blackboard.

A midterm examination (15%) will take place **in class**, on Thursday, 10/24. The purpose of having this examination is for me to assess your understanding of the concepts we have covered, without the aid of notes.

Senate Opposition Research Assignment (15%). Due Monday, 11/25. Instructions will be posted on Blackboard.

Final Exam (25%): Thursday 12/12.

Washington Lab (15%): This portion of your grade is based on your attendance of lab sessions (5%), but it will also include two short (one-page) reflection papers (5% each) on your choice of lab sessions. These reflections should connect what we are learning in the class with your experience in the lab session. Reflection papers are due the Monday after your lab session.

Finally, **participation (15%)** is an important element of this course. The more engaged you are, the more interesting the class will be. I define participation in a broad way, because I know that students have various levels of comfort when it comes to participating in and outside of class. Class participation includes contributing to classroom discussion, sending me notes on the readings, in-class writing assignments, meeting with me during office hours, and emailing me about current events that pertain to topics we are covering in class. Any of these activities can contribute to your participation grade. Excessive absenteeism may adversely affect your participation grade. You are allowed **two**, no-questions asked absences. Please let me know if you know you are going to be missing class.

Grading Policy:

Here are the grade cutoffs that I will use when calculating your final grade:

Exemplary		Good		Acceptable		Unacceptable	
A	93%-100%	B+	87%-89%	C+	77%-79%	D	65%-69%
A-	90%-92%	B	84%-86%	C	74%-76%	F	Under 65%
		B-	80%-83%	C-	70%-73%		

How to Submit Assignments:

You will submit your assignments via Blackboard. It is much easier for me if you post your assignment as a Word Document so I can provide in-text comments. Microsoft Office is available for students to download free of charge, via the technology tab in the AU Portal.

Please do not submit assignments via email. I will only provide feedback and grades on once they are submitted on Blackboard. The SafeAssign plagiarism detection tool, which is integrated into Blackboard, compares your work against other student papers, as well as academic articles and internet resources, to generate an "Originality Report" that identifies areas of potential overlap. See the Academic Integrity Code policy at the end of this syllabus.

Course Policies

What Happens If I Submit an Assignment Late?

Late assignments will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade each day it is late (in other words, a B+ becomes a B, a B- becomes a C+, etc.)

Because I must submit final course grades 72 hours after the scheduled final exam time, you cannot hand in late final exams or final papers if you have not been granted an incomplete for the course.

What About Extensions?

I understand that you have many other classes and responsibilities outside of this course. I may be willing to grant extensions, **but only if you communicate with me at least 24 hours *prior* to the due date.** Otherwise, the assignment grade will be penalized in accordance with the above late work policy.

If you experience an unexpected emergency or other personal crises that prevents you from turning in an assignment on time, please contact me as soon as possible.

What If I Need Accommodations?

In this class, I aim to provide the most inclusive environment possible and equal access to the curriculum for all students. If, at any point during the semester, you find yourself struggling to fully access the content of this course for any reason, you are welcome (but not required) to send me an email, talk with me after class or come by my office hours to discuss your specific needs. If you need an accommodation, I'll try to make it happen. It is especially helpful if folks with non-visible disabilities or who pass, or mask speak with me so I can address your needs. Likewise, if English is not your first language and reading and/or writing in English presents difficulties for you, it helps me to know that.

You may also contact the Academic Support and Access Center (ASAC) at asac@american.edu which can assist you in obtaining documentation to receive the accommodations you need for all your courses. For certain accommodations, such as extra time for exams, you need to obtain this documentation. I encourage to contact ASAC so you can ensure that your instructors in all your courses can meet your needs.

I understand that personal circumstances may also arise, often unexpectedly, that affect your ability to engage with the course. Again, you are welcome (but not required) to contact me to discuss what would help you complete coursework. You may also contact the Dean of Students (DOS) at dos@american.edu.

Both the ASAC and the DOS handle your information in a confidential way. They will ask your instructors to provide the accommodations that you need, but they do not disclose the reason.

A full list of services available to students at AU is provided at the end of this syllabus.

Our Classroom Environment:

When interacting with your classmates I expect you to always respect others' ideas, opinions, and comments. While tolerance toward the opinions of others does not preclude expressions of disagreement, which are, indeed, encouraged, it does require that these expressions be based on the content of the ideas expressed.

This course affirms people of all gender expressions and gender identities. If you prefer to be called a different name than what is on the class roster, please let me know. Please also inform me of your preferred gender pronoun (or if you do not utilize gender pronouns) at any point during this course.

Laptop Policy:

The use of laptops in class is highly discouraged. Often, laptops wind up being detrimental to learning and affect your engagement with the class. Because this class is largely discussion-based and centered on the texts at hand, it is important to be fully present. If you bring a laptop to class, it is to be used exclusively for note-taking purposes. If you are using a laptop, I reserve the right to ask you to email me your notes at the end of any class. I also reserve the right to change this policy if it is being abused.

Course Schedule

As the course progresses or we need to adjust, I may make updates to the required readings or due dates listed below. I will email you if I make any changes to this syllabus and will update the syllabus on Blackboard accordingly. Occasionally we may have additional readings, related to current events or recent developments, and I will send out links to these—noting whether these readings are required or supplemental—in advance of the class in which we will be discussing them.

The readings are of various lengths. Some are quite short, and some are much longer, so I encourage you to skim the syllabus and plan your reading schedule accordingly.

Key Dates/Deadlines:

Constitutional Amendment Proposal: Due Monday, 9/23

Midterm Examination: Thursday, 10/24

Senate Opposition Research Assignment: Due Monday, 11/25

Final Exam: Thursday, 12/12

Week 1: 8/26 and 8/29

Monday 8/26: Introduction to the Course

Thursday 8/29: The NYT 1619 Project: “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>

Part I: Foundations

Week 2: 9/2 and 9/5

Monday, 9/2: Labor Day (No Class)

Thursday 9/5: Abernathy Chapter 2: The Constitution (pp. 32-66)

The Constitution of the United States (in Abernathy, Appendix 3, pp. 461-467)

Recommended: “America is living James Madison’s Nightmare.”

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/james-madison-mob-rule/568351/>

Week 3: 9/9 and 9/12

Monday, 9/9: Abernathy Chapter 3: Federalism (pp. 70-100)

Thursday, 9/12: Excerpt from *Riker, Federalism, Origin, Operation and Significance* (on Blackboard)

“How liberals learned to love federalism.” https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/how-liberals-learned-to-love-federalism/2019/07/12/babd9f52-8c5f-11e9-b162-8f6f41ec3c04_story.html

Week 4: 9/16 and 9/19

Monday, 9/16: Abernathy Chapter 4: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights (pp. 103-138)

Thursday, 9.19: “America Moved on From Its Gay-Rights Moment—And Left a Legal Mess Behind.” <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/lgbtq-rights-america-arent-resolved/596287/>

Part II: Political Behavior and Mass Politics

Week 5: 9/23 and 9/26

Monday, 9/23: **Constitutional Amendment Proposal Due**

Abernathy Chapter 5: Public Opinion (pp. 142-170)

Thursday, 9/26: Excerpt from Kinder and Cam, *Us Against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion* (on Blackboard)

“Key findings on Americans’ views of race in 2019.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/09/key-findings-on-americans-views-of-race-in-2019/>

“Views about whether whites benefit from societal advantages split sharply along racial and partisan lines.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/28/views-about-whether-whites-benefit-from-societal-advantages-split-sharply-along-racial-and-partisan-lines/>

Week 6: 9/30 and 10/3

Monday, 9/30: Abernathy Chapter 6: The Media (pp. 175-202)

New York Times Fake News Quiz: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/04/technology/facebook-influence-campaigns-quiz.html>

Thursday, 10/3: Mutz, D. (2016). “Harry Potter and the Deathly Donald” (on Blackboard)

Week 7: 10/7 and 10/10

Monday, 10/7: Abernathy Chapter 7: Parties, Elections and Participation (pp. 207-246)

Thursday, 10/10: Excerpt from Aldrich, *Why Parties?* A second look (on Blackboard)

Week 8: 10/14 and 10/17

Monday, 10/14: “The Electoral College Is the Greatest Threat to Our Democracy: It has not stood the test of time.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/opinion/the-electoral-college.html?module=inline>

“What the Electoral College Saves Us From.” <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/04/what-the-electoral-college-saves-us-from/>

Recommended: “Abolishing the Electoral College Used To Be A Bipartisan Position. Not Anymore”: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/abolishing-the-electoral-college-used-to-be-bipartisan-position-not-anymore/>

Thursday, 10/17: Excerpt from opinion in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) (on Blackboard)

Week 9: 10/21 and 10/24

Monday, 10/21: Midterm Review Session

Thursday, 10/24: **Midterm Examination**

Part III: Institutions

Week 10: 10/28 and 10/31

Monday, 10/28: Abernathy Chapter 8: Interest Groups and Social Movements (pp. 251-275)

Thursday, 10/31: Excerpt from Kollman, *Outside Lobbying* (on Blackboard)

“The solution to lobbying is more lobbying.” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/04/29/the-solution-to-lobbying-is-more-lobbying/>

Week 11: 11/4 and 11/7

Monday, 11/4: Abernathy Chapter 9: Congress (pp. 279-313)

Thursday, 11/7: “There’s much less gender bias in politics than you think. Here’s why.” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/24/how-much-does-gender-bias-affect-u-s-elections/>

Week 12: 11/11 and 11/14

Monday, 11/11: "Stacey Abram's fight for a fair vote"

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/19/stacey-abrams-fight-for-a-fair-vote>

Thursday, 11/14: "Not Gerrymandering, but Districting: More Evidence on How Democrats Won the Popular Vote but Lost the Congress." <https://themonkeycage.org/2012/11/not-gerrymandering-but-districting-more-evidence-on-how-democrats-won-the-popular-vote-but-lost-the-congress/>

"Here's one way to end partisan gerrymandering: Don't break up Zip codes."

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/10/22/heres-one-way-to-end-partisan-gerrymandering-dont-break-up-zip-codes/>

Week 13: 11/18 and 11/21

Monday, 11/18: Abernathy Chapter 10: The Presidency (pp. 317-345)

Thursday, 11/21: PUBLIC LAW 107-40—SEPT. 18, 2001: AUTHORIZATION FOR USE OF UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES. <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>

"Trump's Tweets and the Authorization of War." <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/trumps-tweets-and-the-authorization-of-war>

Week 14: 11/25 and 11/28

Monday, 11/25: **Senate Opposition Research Project Due**

Excerpt from Cohen et al, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nomination Before and After Reforms* (on Blackboard)

Recommended: "The US presidential primary process, explained." <https://www.vox.com/a/presidential-primaries-2016-republican-democrat/presidential-primaries-explained>

Thursday, 11/28: Thanksgiving (no class)

Week 15: 12/2 and 12/5

Monday, 12/2: Readings TBA (will be centered on the 2020 Democratic primary)

Thursday, 12/5: Recent Developments and Conclusions

Final Exam, Thursday 12/12 from 2:30-5PM

Academic Integrity Code:

Standards of academic conduct are set forth in the university's [Academic Integrity Code](#). By registering for this course, students have acknowledged their awareness of the Academic Integrity Code and they are obliged to become familiar with their rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code. Violations of the Academic Integrity Code will not be treated lightly, and disciplinary action will be taken should violations occur. This includes cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism.

Plagiarism is the representation of someone else's words, ideas, or work as one's own without attribution. Plagiarism may involve using someone else's wording without using quotation marks—a distinctive name, a phrase, a sentence, or an entire passage or essay. Misrepresenting sources is another form of plagiarism. The issue of plagiarism applies to any type of work, including exams, papers, or other writing, computer programs, art, music, photography, video, and other media.

Student Code of Conduct

The central commitment of American University is the development of thoughtful, responsible human beings in the context of a challenging yet supportive academic community. The [Student Code of Conduct](#) is designed to benefit the American University community and to assist in forming the highest standards of ethics and morals among its members. By registering for this course, students have acknowledged their awareness of the Student Code of Conduct and they are obliged to become familiar with their rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code.

Emergency Preparedness:

In the event of a declared pandemic (influenza or other communicable disease), American University will implement a plan for meeting the needs of all members of the university community. Should the university be required to close for a period of time, we are committed to ensuring that all aspects of our educational programs will be delivered to our students. These may include altering and extending the duration of the traditional term schedule to complete essential instruction in the traditional format and/or use of distance instructional methods. Specific strategies will vary from class to class, depending on the format of the course and the timing of the emergency. Faculty will communicate class-specific information to students via AU e-mail and Blackboard, while students must inform their faculty immediately of any absence due to illness. Students are responsible for checking their AU e-mail regularly and keeping themselves informed of emergencies. In the event of a declared pandemic or other emergency, students should refer to the AU Web site (american.edu/emergency) and the AU information line at (202) 885-1100 for general university-wide information, as well as contact their faculty and/or respective dean's office for course and school/college-specific information.

Student Support and Services:

As I have said, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are experiencing difficulties, but in addition to the resources within your department, a wide range of services is available to support you in your efforts to meet course requirements.

Academic Support & Access Center MGC 243, 202-885-3360 supports the academic development and educational goals of all AU students while also providing support to students with disabilities. We offer workshops on topics of interest to all students such as managing the college workload, stress management, time management note taking, critical thinking, memory skills, and test taking. Additional support includes free private and group tutoring in many subjects, supplemental instruction, The Math Lab and The Writing Lab are also available.

Counseling Center MGC 214, 202-885-3500 is here to help students make the most of your university experience, both personally and academically. We offer individual and group counseling, urgent care, self-help resources, referrals to private care, as well as programming to help you gain the skills and insights needed to overcome adversity and thrive while you are in college. Contact the Counseling Center to make an appointment in person or by telephone or visit the Counseling Center page on the AU website for additional information.

Center for Diversity & Inclusion MGC 201 and 202, 202-885-3651 is dedicated to enhancing LGBTQ, Multicultural, First Generation, and Women's experiences on campus and to advance AU's commitment to respecting & valuing diversity by serving as a resource and liaison to students, staff, and faculty on issues of equity through education, outreach, and advocacy.

OASIS: The Office of Advocacy Services for Interpersonal and Sexual Violence, The Wellness Center, Hughes Hall Room 105, 202-885-3276, provides free and confidential advocacy services for anyone in the campus community who is impacted by sexual violence (sexual assault, dating or domestic violence, and stalking).

American University expressly prohibits any form of discriminatory harassment including sexual harassment, dating and domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. The university is an equal opportunity, affirmative action institution that operates in compliance with applicable laws and regulations, and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including pregnancy), age, sexual orientation, disability, marital status, personal appearance, gender identity and expression, family responsibilities, political affiliation, source of income, veteran status, an individual's genetic information or any other bases under federal or local laws in its programs and activities. If you experience any of the above, you have the option of filing a report with the AU Department of Public Safety (202-885-2527) or the Office of the Dean of Students 202-885-3300 dos@american.edu. Please keep in mind that all faculty and staff – with the exception of counselors in the Counseling Center, victim advocates in the Wellness Center, medical providers in the Student Health Center, and ordained clergy in the Kay Spiritual Life Center – who are aware of or witness this conduct are required to report this information to the university, regardless of the location of the incident.

The Writing Center First floor of Bender Library, offers free, individual coaching sessions to all AU students. In your 45-minute session, a student writing consultant can help you address your assignments, understand the conventions of academic writing, and learn how to revise and edit your own work. Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday. Call 202-885-2991 to arrange a session. Meanwhile find handouts, information, and a weekly writer's blog at the Writing Center website and on Facebook.

[International Student & Scholar Services](#), Batelle 4th Butler Pavilion, Rm. 410. Resources to support academic success and participation in campus life including academic counseling, support for second language learners, response to questions about visas, immigration status and employment and intercultural programs, clubs and resources.

Technical Support

Blackboard Support: Please let me know about any technical problems with access to Blackboard as soon as possible and also contact the Blackboard Support Center at blackboard@american.edu or call (202) 885-3904 for 24/7 support. Students can also log on to [Blackboard Help](#) for support.

- **AU Help Desk (focuses on all other IT issues):** Answers to your technology questions are just an e-mail, instant message, or phone call away. Contact the IT Help Desk at 202-885-2550, helpdesk@american.edu, or [AskAmericanUHelp](#) to reach one of our professional staff who can answer your questions and provide general troubleshooting assistance. Students can also log on to the [Need Help Now?](#) portal for support.