

GVPT 170 — American Government

Fall 2023

Lecture: Monday & Wednesday 1:00–1:50pm, 0130 Tydings Hall
Discussion Section: Friday (time & room location vary by section)

Instructor: Prof. Patrick Wohlfarth
Office Hours: Monday 2:30–3:30pm, or by appointment

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“Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

— James Madison, *Federalist No. 51*

James Madison’s argument in *Federalist No. 51* embodies a central principle of American government—the design of the Constitution and its institutions strikes a necessary balance of power. Elected officials have the authority to act on behalf of the mass public, but citizens retain the ability to regularly endorse or repudiate their actions. The primary institutions of the federal government—the presidency, Congress, and the courts—each possess distinct yet, to a considerable degree, overlapping responsibilities and authority. The Constitution declares the federal government and its laws to be supreme, but retains a degree of authority for the individual states and places limits on the scope of federal power. American government, as a result, functions as a complex set of interdependent institutions and actors. Each has the authority to make the necessary decisions to support our nation’s well-being, so long as

those actions garner sufficient support to navigate a political process designed to block them. This course will provide the foundation to better understand the motivations of the framers of our constitutional government, the institutions and decision-making processes that they established, and the implications of their choices for contemporary American politics.

Course Description & Goals

This course offers an introduction to American government. Although it is impossible to cover all facets of the national government in great detail during a single term, the primary objective is to convey a broad overview of how our political system operates. In doing so, we will explore how political scientists approach the study of American government and the political process. This will involve moving beyond mere description of our governmental system by examining theories designed to explain why various features of American government function the way that they do. My central goal is to offer the foundation for further academic study as well as the resources for more engaged citizenship in the future.

This is a 3-credit undergraduate course designed to meet a university general education (DSHS) requirement, and for the Government & Politics major. Students must complete all assigned readings, come to class prepared and on time (both lectures & sections), and actively participate in section discussions. The primary aim is to familiarize students with the foundations of our government and Constitution, the rules and structure of our political institutions, and the nature of mass behavior. Following this course, you should be able to:

- Describe the motivations that the framers possessed and the compromises involved in crafting the Constitution.
- Identify and explain the motivations and incentives behind the behavior of various actors within the primary institutions (e.g., Congress, presidency, courts, etc.) of the American political system.
- Describe the role of the mass public in affecting the way elected officials act, and in general, the way our political system operates.

Course Reading

There are three required books for this course:

- Kernell, Samuel, Gary C. Jacobson, Thad Kousser, Lynn Vavreck, and Timothy R. Johnson. 2023. *The Logic of American Politics* (11th ed.). Washington: Sage (CQ) Press.
- Stimson, James A. 2015. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

I encourage all students to read a major newspaper regularly (e.g., *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and/or *The Wall Street Journal*), as I will regularly integrate current events into lectures and section discussions. *Please note:* Additional (required) section readings may be announced and posted under the course documents section on the Elms course website (<https://elms.umd.edu>).

Course Requirements & Evaluation

Your final grade will reflect the sum of points earned from each of the following assignments:

Weekly Section Quizzes	30%
GVPT Subject Pool Participation (two studies)	5%
Midterm Exam #1	20%
Midterm Exam #2	20%
Final Exam (non-cumulative)	25%

Grades are based upon how many points you earn according to the following distribution:

A+	“Excellent mastery of the subject”	97-100 pts.
A		93-96 pts.
A-		90-92 pts.
B+	“Good mastery of the subject”	87-89 pts.
B		83-86 pts.
B-		80-82 pts.
C+	“Acceptable mastery of the subject”	77-79 pts.
C		73-76 pts.
C-		70-72 pts.
D+	“Borderline understanding of the subject”	67-69 pts.
D		63-66 pts.
D-		60-62 pts.
F	“Failure to understand the subject”	fewer than 60 pts.

Attendance, Participation & Section Quizzes

I expect you to come prepared to lectures, participate in section discussions, and demonstrate comprehension of the assigned readings. Your teaching assistant will administer a short quiz during each Friday discussion section. Quizzes will usually feature one open-ended question based on the current week’s lecture material and/or the section reading assigned for that day. Some weeks’ quizzes will be graded based solely on completion; others will be graded based on the content (and accuracy) of your answer. I will drop your lowest quiz grade, and thus your average grade on all remaining quizzes will contribute 20% toward your final course grade. The objective of this policy is to improve the substantive quality of section discussions and to incentivize the regular study and attendance necessary to maximize your learning potential in this course.

IMPORTANT: Your teaching assistant will administer quizzes at different times across different weeks (i.e., sometimes at the beginning of section, other times at the end of section). If you are not present (or late) when your teaching assistant administers a quiz, you will not receive extra time. Any quiz missed due to an unexcused absence will result in a zero grade (with no exceptions). An absence will only be excused if you present the appropriate documentation to your teaching assistant. If you miss a quiz due to an excused absence, you must contact your teaching assistant **within one week following your return to class** in order to arrange a makeup. Failure to arrange a makeup date within this one-week period will result in a zero grade for the missed quiz.

Government & Politics Subject Pool Participation

Scholarly discovery depends, in large part, on research methods. Exposure to research methods is a valuable learning tool for students trying to understand research in political science. Some of the most exciting and cutting-edge research is being conducted right here at Maryland, and so there's no better opportunity to learn about research in political science than by participating in research studies. The Government and Politics department encourages students to gain hands-on research experience and knowledge. To support students in gaining this knowledge, students who take part in two studies conducted by GVPT faculty and graduate students will receive participation credit. I have allotted 5% of your final course grade to support this endeavor. Students who complete all of the required studies will receive full credit for this grade component; those who do not will receive no credit.

Each study will take about 20-30 minutes to complete. If you prefer not to serve as a participant, you may elect to satisfy the requirement by writing a 3-5 page review of a quantitative research article. (If you are under 18 years old, you must have parental consent on file for you to participate in a research study, or you may choose to write the paper instead.) However, you must notify the Research Administrator—Jordan Spencer (jspeck13@umd.edu)—before the last day of schedule adjustment for the semester if you wish to register for the research alternative. *Please note:* you must participate in *all* of the studies this semester (or write the review paper) to receive credit.

Exams

There will be three closed-book examinations in this course—two midterms and a non-cumulative final examination. You will take each exam on the Canvas (Elms) course site on the scheduled day during the regular class time (1:00-1:50 PM). You may not take an exam outside of the normal class time, unless you obtain prior approval from the instructor. The format of each exam will consist of both multiple choice and short-answer/essay questions. I will notify you of the precise format at least one week in advance of each exam. You can expect the exams to test your knowledge of the in-class lectures, required readings, and section discussion material. Regular attendance, reading, and attentiveness during both lectures and sections will be critical to experience success on each exam.

Course Policies

Please consult the general list of classroom policies, prepared by the Office of Undergraduate Studies at: <http://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html>. The following are relevant course-specific policies to supplement those from Undergraduate Studies:

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is a core value of institutions of higher learning. It is your responsibility to refrain from engaging in plagiarism, cheating, and dishonest behavior. The official university honor code policy is located at: <http://www.president.umd.edu/policies/iii100a.html>. Needless to say, exams, quizzes, and the assigned term paper should reflect only your own work. But, studying and class preparation can (and should) be done with others.

Students with Disabilities

I will make every effort to accommodate those who register with the Disability Support Service (DSS) office and provide a University of Maryland DSS Accommodation form. I can only accommodate those who present the required written DSS documentation.

Excused Absence Policy

If possible, you should give advance notice to your teaching assistant if you must miss a section or scheduled exam date (with an accepted, verifiable excuse). When advance notice is not feasible, you must present (**on the very next section that you are in attendance**) the appropriate documentation to verify that your absence should be excused. Consistent with university guidelines, excused absences only occur “due to illness, religious observance, participation in University activities at the request of University authorities, or compelling circumstances beyond the student’s control.” No student will be allowed to make up a quiz or exam without a verifiable excused absence.

You may submit a self-signed note in order to be excused for missing one discussion section. This note must include the date, a statement that the information you have provided is true, and your signature. You must also state that if your absence is found to be false, you understand that you will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. Please note that official university policy states that only one self-signed note for a single absence will be allowed. For all other non-consecutive absences, I will require written documentation from the Health Center or a medical doctor. Please also note that scheduled exam dates are considered major grading events, and thus a self-signed note will not be sufficient to verify an excused absence on those class days. Lastly, please be aware that university policy requires a written request (within the first two weeks of the semester) from any student who must miss a scheduled class due to a specific religious observance.

Course Schedule

The following is a tentative class and reading schedule. The course schedule and required readings are subject to change. It is important that you **DO NOT FALL BEHIND** in the reading, as it will be difficult to catch up. The lecture material and readings will often overlap, but sometimes they will not. However, exams will cover both the readings and lectures, and outside reading assignments will frequently become the subject of section discussions. Therefore, diligent preparation and timely reading are essential. *Please note:* Required readings listed each day should be completed **PRIOR** to the start of class.

Unit I — Conceptual & Constitutional Foundations of American Government

August 28: Course Introduction

August 30: No Class (APSA Conference)

September 1 (section): Introductory Meeting

The Logic of Politics

- Provide a general working definition of politics.
- Explain the intuition behind various collective action problems that are common in our political system, such as the free rider problem and the tragedy of the commons.

September 4: No Class (Labor Day)

September 6: Kernell et al., Chapter 1

September 8 (section): Kernell et al., Chapter 1

The U.S. Constitution

- Explain the motivations of the framers and compromises that led to the structure and clauses of the original Constitution.
- Evaluate and discuss arguments in the *Federalist Papers* in light of the contemporary constitutional structure.

September 11: Kernell et al., Chapter 2

September 13: Kernell et al., Chapter 2

September 15 (section): U.S. Constitution; *Federalist No. 10 & 51* (see, Appendix 3-5)

Federalism

- Discuss the historical background and rationale behind the federalist system of government in the United States.
- Evaluate and discuss the implications of federalism for contemporary public policy.

September 18: Kernell et al., Chapter 3

September 20: Kernell et al., Chapter 3

September 22 (section): Kernell et al., Chapter 3

Civil Liberties & Civil Rights

- Outline the important civil liberties protected by the Bill of Rights (either explicitly or implicitly) and discuss the process of selective incorporation.
- Discuss the topics of free speech, abortion, and gun ownership from the perspective of civil liberties granted (or implied) in the Constitution.
- Identify the fundamental differences between civil liberties and civil rights.
- Discuss the varying standards used to judge the constitutionality of group distinctions and civil rights protections in the United States.

September 25: Kernell et al., Chapter 5

September 27: Kernell et al., Chapter 5

September 29 (section): Kernell et al., Chapter 4

October 2: Kernell et al., Chapter 4

October 4: Midterm Exam #1

Unit II — Institutions of American Government

Congress

- Explain the various rules, procedures, and functions of the U.S. House and Senate.
- Evaluate and discuss the differences between each chamber's organizational structure and their effects on the legislative process.
- Explain the processes of reapportionment, redistricting, and gerrymandering, and discuss their implications for representation.

October 6 (section): Kernell et al., Chapter 6

October 9: Kernell et al., Chapter 6

October 11: Kernell et al., Chapter 6

October 13 (section): Kernell et al., Chapter 6

October 16: Kernell et al., Chapter 6

Presidency

- Summarize the major tasks and functions of the U.S. presidency.
- Identify the powers inherent in the presidency, both from institutional and individual perspectives.
- Evaluate Neustadt's classic argument involving the power of persuasion.
- Evaluate an alternative argument of modern presidential leadership: the power of contemporary presidents to "go public."

October 18: Kernell et al., Chapter 7

October 20 (section): Kernell et al., Chapter 7

October 23: Kernell et al., Chapter 7

Bureaucracy

- Identify the major objectives of, and influences on, bureaucratic actors and federal agencies in the political process.
- Discuss the nature of principal-agent relationships from an institutional perspective.
- Evaluate the role of delegation in the bureaucratic process, including the causes and consequences of varying degrees of delegation.

October 25: Kernell et al., Chapter 8

October 27 (section): Kernell et al., Chapter 8

October 30: Kernell et al., Chapter 8

Judiciary

- Describe the structure of the American judicial system and the process of judicial selection at various levels of government.

- Discuss the general process involved in Supreme Court decision making, progressing from a *writ of certiorari* to published opinions.
- Discuss the predominant theories proposed to explain judicial decision making.

November 1: Kernell et al., Chapter 9

November 3 (section): Kernell et al., Chapter 9

November 6: Kernell et al., Chapter 9

November 8: Midterm Exam #2

Unit III — Political Behavior & The Mass Public

Public Opinion

- Describe the seminal sources of—and numerous influences on—individual attitudes within the mass public.
- Discuss the primary features involved in constructing a scientific survey in order to systematically measure public opinion.
- Explain how aggregate perceptions and opinions can shape the general course of American politics.
- Describe the historical evolution of issue preferences and the substantive meaning of liberalism and conservatism.

November 10 (section): Stimson Ch. 1

November 13: Kernell et al., Chapter 10

November 15: Kernell et al., Chapter 10; Stimson Ch. 2

November 17 (section): Stimson Ch. 2

November 20: Stimson Ch. 3

November 22: Thanksgiving Holiday (No Class)

November 24: Thanksgiving Holiday (No Section Meeting)

Voting, Campaigns, & Elections

- Identify the most important predictors of voter turnout and individual vote choice in American national elections.

- Discuss how otherwise uninformed and inattentive voters can utilize particular heuristics to help make reasoned judgments.
- Discuss the role of campaigns and public approval in the political system. Do campaigns matter?

November 27: Stimson Ch. 3; Kernell et al., Chapter 11

November 29: Kernell et al., Chapter 11; Stimson Ch. 4

December 1 (section): Stimson Ch. 4

December 4: Kernell et al., Chapter 11; Stimson Ch. 5

December 6: Stimson Ch. 5

December 8 (section): Stimson Ch. 6

Political Parties

- Discuss the historical evolution and realignment of the American party system.
- Describe the major functions of political parties in electoral politics.

December 11: Kernell et al., Chapter 12

Final Exam: December 14, 1:30-3:30pm

One Final Note:

All grade appeals **will only be considered in writing**. Should you believe that you deserve a higher grade on an exam, quiz, or the term paper, you must write a paragraph or so outlining your case and why the grade should be changed. You should submit this written appeal to your teaching assistant, who will then be happy to read your explanation and re-grade your exam, quiz, or paper. If you are still dissatisfied with your grade following your teaching assistant's appeal decision, you may then submit a written appeal to the instructor. **The deadline for consideration of any appeal will be one week following the receipt of the grade in question.** There will be no exceptions to this policy. Of course, you may always ask questions for clarification, but I (or your teaching assistant) will not consider grade changes that you have not pursued in writing (or that you fail to submit before the one-week deadline).

Please note: **All course materials are copyright protected.** You must receive written consent from the instructor prior to any reproduction or distribution of lectures or any other course materials.