

GVPT 170 — American Government

Spring 2015

Lecture: Monday & Wednesday 10:00–10:50am, 0200 Skinner Hall
Discussion Section: Friday (time & room location vary by section)

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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 social science requirement, or 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, and Lynn Vavreck. 2013. *The Logic of American Politics* (6th ed.). Washington: CQ Press.
- Stimson, James A. 2004. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- *American Government Supplementary Readings*. Pearson Custom Press.
Please note: This book is only available to purchase in the university bookstore.

All students should also regularly read a major newspaper (e.g., *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, or *The Wall Street Journal*) prior to class each day, as current events will be regularly integrated 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:

Pop Quizzes (administered in section)	20%
Midterm Exam #1	20%
Midterm Exam #2	20%
Final Exam (non-cumulative)	20%
Term Paper	20%

Grades are defined below and 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 & Pop Quizzes

I expect you to come prepared to lectures, participate in section discussions, and demonstrate comprehension of the assigned reading. Your teaching assistant will administer at least five pop quizzes during the semester (during section meetings). I will drop your lowest quiz grade, and thus your average grade on all remaining quizzes will contribute 20% to your final course grade. Quizzes will feature two short, open-ended questions based on the current week’s lecture material and the section reading assigned for that day. The objective of this policy is to improve the substantive quality of section discussions and to incentivize the regular reading and attendance necessary to maximize your learning potential in this course.

IMPORTANT: Your teaching assistant will administer a quiz only at the beginning of section. If you are late, your teaching assistant will still collect all quizzes 15 minutes after the start of section, regardless of successful completion. 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.

Exams

There will be three examinations in this course—two in-class midterms and a non-cumulative final examination. 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. Please note that you will not be permitted to bring (or use) any technology during the exams, including both computers and cell phones.

Term Paper

You will complete one written term paper in this course. The term paper will require analytical, critical thinking where you must apply concepts learned during the course. The goal is to help you improve your critical thinking skills while making reasoned arguments. More details will follow on the specific description and scope of the paper. Late papers will be accepted, but will be subject to a **10% penalty per day** beyond the due date.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is a core value of institutions of higher learning. It is your responsibility to refrain from plagiarism, cheating, and generally dishonest behavior. The official university honor code policy is located at: www.shc.umd.edu/SHC/HonorPledgeInformation.aspx. 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 (and your teaching assistant) 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. We can only accommodate those who provide the required written DSS documentation.

Excused Absence Policy

If at all possible, you should give advance notice to your teaching assistant if you must miss a section or scheduled exam date (and have an accepted, verifiable excuse). When advance notice is not feasible, you must present your teaching assistant (**on the very next section that you are in attendance**) with 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, exam, or request an extension on the term paper deadline without a verifiable excused absence.

You may submit a self-signed note in order to be excused for missing one section. This note must include the date of illness, 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 and the term paper due date are considered major grading events, and thus a self-signed note will not be sufficient to verify an excused absence on these four 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

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.

January 26: Course Introduction

January 28: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 1 (pp. 1-39)

January 30 (section): Supplementary Readings #1 (pp. 1-3)
—“The Logic of Collective Action” (Olson)

The 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.

February 2: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 2 (pp. 40-84); U.S. Constitution (Appendix #3, pp. 703-714)

February 4: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 2 (pp. 40-84)

February 6 (section): Supplementary Readings #2 to #6 (pp. 5-35)
— “Federalist No. 10,” “Federalist No. 51,” & “Federalist No. 54”
— “Antifederalist No. 9” & “Antifederalist No. 12”

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.

February 9: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 3 (pp. 86-127)

February 11: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 3 (pp. 86-127)

February 13 (section): Supplementary Readings #7 & #8 (pp. 37-48)
—“Birthday Cake Federalism” (Wildavsky)
— “American Federalism: Half-Full or Half-Empty?” (Derthick)

Civil Liberties

- 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 abortion and gun ownership from the perspective of civil liberties granted (or implied) in the Constitution.

February 16: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 5 (pp. 182-228)

February 18: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 5 (pp. 182-228)

February 20 (section): Excerpts from *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008) & *McDonald v. Chicago* (2010) (available on Elms)

Civil Rights

- 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.

February 23: Washington Post-University of Maryland Poll Panel Discussion — McKeldin Library, Special Events Room (#6137)

Please note: All students that attend (and submit a signed honor statement to their TA during the event) will receive one bonus point on the first midterm exam.

February 25: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 4 (pp. 128-181)

February 27 (section): Supplementary Readings #9 & #10 (pp. 49-68)

- “Affirmative Action: The University Admissions Debate and Beyond” (Wasserman)
- “Context and the Court” (Greenhouse)

March 2: 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.
- Discuss the individual motivations that different legislators may possess and evaluate Mayhew’s argument in *The Electoral Connection*.

March 4: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 6 (pp. 239-296)

March 6 (section): Supplementary Readings #11 & #12 (pp. 69-94)

- “Congress: The Electoral Connection” (Mayhew)
- “The Consensus Mode of Decision” (Kingdon)

March 9: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 6 (pp. 239-296)

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."

March 11: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 7 (pp. 298-344)

March 13 (section): Supplementary Readings #13 (pp. 95-118) & Kernell's "Going Public"
— "The Power to Persuade" (Neustadt)
— "Going Public in Theory and Practice" (Kernell) (available on Elms)

March 16: No Lecture (spring break)

March 18: No Lecture (spring break)

March 20: No Section (spring break)

March 23: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 7 (pp. 298-344)

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.

March 25: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 8 (pp. 346-391)

March 27 (section): Supplementary Readings #14 (pp. 119-130)
— "Obama and the Federal Bureaucracy" (Dye et al.)

March 30: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 8 (pp. 346-391)

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.

April 1: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 9 (pp. 392-432)

April 3 (section): Supplementary Readings #15 & #16 (pp. 131-164)

—“Federalist No. 78” (Hamilton)

—“The Choices Justices Make” (Epstein & Knight)

April 6: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 9 (pp. 392-432)

April 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.

April 10 (section): Stimson Ch. 1 (pp. 1-22)

April 13: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 10 (pp. 434-479)

April 15: Stimson Ch. 2 (pp. 23-57)

April 17 (section): Stimson Ch. 2 (pp. 23-57)

April 20: Stimson Ch. 3 (pp. 58-95)

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?

April 22: Stimson Ch. 3-4 (pp. 58-136)

April 24 (section): Stimson Ch. 4 (pp. 96-136)

April 27: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 11 (pp. 480-523)

April 29: Stimson Ch. 5-6 (pp. 131-171)

May 1 (section): Stimson Ch. 5-6 (pp. 131-171)

Political Parties

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

May 4: Term Paper Due

— *Please note:* All students must submit a hard copy.

May 6: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 12 (pp. 524-574)

May 8 (section): Supplementary Readings #17 (pp. 165-185)

—“The Polarized Public and the Rise of the Tea Party Movement” (Abramowitz)

Interest Groups

- Describe the varying types and influence of moneyed interests in the American political system.
- Discuss the historical evolution of interest groups as significant actors in the political process.

May 11: Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, & Vavreck Ch. 13 (pp. 576-614)

Final Exam: May 20, 8:00-10:00am, 0200 Skinner Hall

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).

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