American Political System
POL 241

Dr. Rachel Blum

Miami University

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Spring 2020

Class meets: M/W, 11:40am-1:00pm, 237 Shideler Hall.

Office hours: HRN 213, M/W from 1:15pm-4:15pm, or by appointment.
See `https://rachelblum.youcanbook.me/` for availabilities.

TA contact: John Kirchhoefer (kirchhjc@miamioh.edu).

Course Description

POL 241: The American Political System introduces students to key concepts and controversies in American politics. This course is organized into four modules, focusing on representation, the rule of law, civil rights and liberties, and political polarization. In each module, students will gain an in-depth understanding of American political institutions and the rationale behind them through a combination of in-class lectures, hands-on activities, and readings that focus on real-world applications and quantitative literacy. The course will culminate in a final project, in which each student will draw on course concepts to design an original tutorial on a political concept or a creative solution to a political problem.

This course will further the learning outcomes for Political Science Majors in the following ways:

1. Through course readings, lectures, and activities, students will be able to define and explain key concepts in American Politics.

2. Through assignments, class debates, and simulations, students will hone evidence-based reasoning, including identifying appropriate data, evidence, or argument for their projects.

3. Through course readings and assignments, students will learn to identify the appropriate methodology approach to their research design, as well as understanding the ethical components of research choices.

4. Through class debates and interactive assignments, students will practice applying political science knowledge to contemporary political issues.

5. Drawing from material in lectures and readings, students will practice formulating and advocating for positive change in our society through their assignments.

6. As a course meeting the Quantitative Literacy (QL) requirement, students will also be able to fulfill at least the following three QL outcomes:

   (a) Through course lectures, readings, and activities, students will learn to identify the quantitative aspects of a problem or situation.

   (b) Through course lectures, readings, and assignments, students will learn to interpret numerical displays and information.

   (c) Through course lectures, activities, and assignments, students will learn to evaluate, assess, or critique different forms of numerical evidence.

Course Policies

1. Absences

The Student Handbook states, "Every student is expected to attend every class session for which the student is duly registered" (Part VII, Section 01.701).

- **Unexcused absences:** each student has **two** unexcused absences. This means you do not need to get permission for or inform me of these absences, and they will not impact your participation grade. (You will still be responsible for any assignments, including quizzes, due that day.)

- **Excused absences:** these require prior written approval from me, and will not impact your grade. These include things like illness, athletic events, serious family emergencies, jury duty, pregnancy, military service, etc. In accordance with University policy (Part VII, Section 01.701.B), students must give written notice to the instructor within the first two weeks of class of a religious observance, participation in athletic events, or other academic-related group activities that prohibit class attendance.

- **Turning in assignments:** Exceptions to deadlines may be made for illness or serious emergencies at the discretion of the professor. Students participating in a university event, sport, or club should expect to continue to submit assignments on the regular due date.

- **Inclement weather/snow:** In the event of inclement weather preventing me from reaching campus, we will hold our class sessions online via Canvas. I will make slides and a lecture available, and will enable discussion via chatroom. Each student will be required to post at least one substantive comment in the class chatroom on these days. This will not impact assignment due dates.

2. Academic Dishonesty

Cheating, plagiarism, and any form of academic dishonesty in any portion of the academic work for a course will not be tolerated and shall be grounds for awarding a grade of Withdrawal Academic Dishonesty (W(AD)) for the entire course. A W(AD) is calculated as an F in your grade point average.

3. Assignment Due Dates

All written assignments must be turned in on Canvas at the time specified. Late assignments will not be accepted unless prior information has been obtained from the professor. If you believe you have extenuating circumstances, please contact the professor as soon as possible.

4. Technology in classroom

- Cellular Phones: My expectation is that you will turn your phone off and place it in a bag or otherwise out of view during class time.

- Laptop computers/tablets: We will use these in some classes, but not in others. My expectation is that you will bring them, and use them only when instructed.

5. Disability accommodations

I have designed this class to be as accessible as possible. For example, I have built extra time into the quizzes and exams so that all students should be able to complete them in the time allotted. I am happy to make other accommodations if requested. If you have a disability, please register with Miami's student disability services (`https://miamioh.edu/student-life/sds/`) at your earliest convenience, and contact me about any accommodations you might need.

6. Emails and Canvas

- You are responsible for reading and following any instructions I send via email/Canvas.

- You are encouraged to email Dr. Blum or the TA with questions, but follow this checklist first:

  - If your question can be answered by the syllabus, a classmate, the university's resources (IT, library, etc.), or google, do not email me until you have exhausted other options. Otherwise, I may not respond.
  - Only email the instructor or TA with reasonable and appropriate requests. (E.g. a request for a recommendation with adequate time is reasonable; a request to print your paper is not.)
  - Although we attempt to respond quickly, please allow at least two business days for responses.

- Be professional and courteous to myself and the TA in your emails. Address me by my correct title (Dr. Blum or Professor Blum), use complete sentences, and keep your request clear and concise.

7. Course readings

All of the readings for this course will be available for free on our Canvas site. All readings are due by the day they are listed on the syllabus.

Grades and graded components

1. Grading System

- A range (90-100): Achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements.

- B range (80-89): Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.

- C range (70-79): Achievement that meets course requirements in every respect.

- D range (60-69): Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements.

- F (0-59): Represents failure (or no credit) and signifies that the work was either (1) completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit of (2) was not completed.

2. Grading Disputes

- If the problem is simple and obvious (an addition error or entry mistake on Canvas): show evidence of the error to the TA, who will rectify the mistake.

- If the problem is *not* simple and obvious, submit a written statement (no more than 1 page) with the original assignment explaining why the grade should be changed to the TA. The TA retain's the right when re-grading an assignment to raise or lower your grade.

- If the TA cannot resolve your problem, you may email me, along with an explanation of the problem and your correspondence with the TA.

3. Graded Components

- **Class participation: 10%** This includes attendance, participation in class discussions, and participation in office hours. A combination of these factors will determine your participation grade.

- **In-class activities: 20%** We will have regular in-class activities throughout the semester. Students will be graded based on the quality of their participation in these activities. Extra credit opportunities will be available for exemplary work.

- **Midterm assessment: 15%** The midterm assessment will take place in class on March 11th. Further instructions will be posted on Canvas and/or given in class.

- **Final project and presentation: 20%** Each student will design a final project in the format of a podcast, video, website, or powerpoint presentation. Students can choose from one of the following three broad areas 1) An explanation of how something in politics works for a popular audience, 2) a thoughtful discussion of a polarized political issue that presents a different way of thinking about the issue, or 3) a presentation of a bipartisan policy or political reform. Topics can include but are not limited to: the electoral college, electoral/party system reform, party nomination processes or reforms, the role of money in politics, gun policy, abortion policy, policing, election security and voter fraud, presidential power, etc. The last three class periods will consist in students' presentations of their projects. A student's project is due by class time on the day the student is presenting. Further instructions on the projects and presentation formats will be posted on Canvas and discussed in class.

- **Final assessment: 20%** The final assessment will take place during our final exam period. Further instructions will be posted on Canvas and/or given in class.

- **Student's choice: 5%** Students will be allowed to choose between in-class activities, the midterm, the final project, or the final exam for the allocation of 5% of their final grade. Students must indicate their choice to the instructor before the midterm examination.

- **Quizzes and reading sheets: 10%** From time to time the instructor will administer quizzes, pop quizzes, and reading sheets to evaluate student completion and comprehension of the readings.

Course schedule

Note: readings should be completed by the beginning of class on the day they are due.

Module 1: Representation

January 27: Lecture 1: Government and collective action problems
Take citizenship quiz on Canvas

January 29: Lecture 2: Choosing representatives (nominations)

February 3: Activity 1: Iowa Caucuses simulation

February 5: Lecture 3 & Activity 2: Drawing lines (gerrymandering and electoral college)

February 10: Lecture 4: What people want: public opinion

February 12 Activity 3: Poll design

February 17: Lecture 5: Representing whom? Identities and democracy

Module 2: Rule of law

February 19: Lecture 6: The US Constitution and the cradle

February 24: Activity 4: Decoding the Constitution

February 26: Lecture 7: The three branches and their roles

March 2: Activity 5: Impeachment exercise

March 4: Lecture 8: New meanings: rule of law and midterm review

March 9: Midterm assessment

Module 3: Rights and duties

March 11: Lecture 9: Where rights and duties come from

March 16: Lecture 10: Civil rights and civil liberties

March 18: Lecture 11: Judicial review and decisions

March 23 & 25: NO CLASS (Spring Break)

March 30: Activity 6: How courts decide

Module 4: Partisan polarization

April 1: Lecture 12: What is polarization?

April 6: Lecture 13: Where do parties fit?

April 8: Activity 7: Congressional parties simulation

April 13: Lecture 14: Separating parties from ideology

April 15: Lecture 15: Electoral systems

April 20: Activity 8: Electoral reform

April 22: Lecture 16: Money in politics

April 27: Lecture 17: The free press and media bias

Final projects and final exam

April 29: Presentations: How politics works

May 4: Presentations: Unpacking the issues

May 6: Presentations: Bipartisan reforms

May 13: Final exam from 12:45 to 2:45 pm