

POLITICAL SCIENCE 121 (UPDATED 8/1/19)
US GOVERNMENT
W. R. WILKERSON (HE/HIM/HIS)

SUNY ONEONTA
FALL 2019

WHAT THIS COURSE IS ABOUT

This is a first college course in American government and politics. I know many of you are cynical about politics. You feel that it doesn't matter. That it is corrupt. That it is not worthy of your time and energy. Based on recent events you might be thinking: "how can you NOT be cynical and pessimistic?"

Suspend this belief. Hard? Maybe, but politics matters. Politics affects you every minute of every day and you will be well served to better understand how and why. I hope that taking this class seriously will show you why politics matters and why it can be so frustrating at times. I have three main goals in teaching this course. First, I hope you will leave this class with more knowledge about the workings of the American political system than you started with. For many of you, this will be your only college-level political science class and as citizens of the United States and as future educators, business leaders, lawyers, government officials, scientists, dietitians the knowledge that you gain will assist you in meeting your responsibilities as voters and professionals. Second, and equally important, I hope that you will improve your ability to think about political subjects by investigating some serious and critical issues of American politics and government and be able to evaluate for yourself how well it works. Finally, some of you will go on to be political science majors. For you, this course will introduce basic concepts and methods that are central to the study of American politics and political science in general.

To meet these goals we will investigate the current state of American government and at the end of the semester we will examine the events and ideas surrounding the founding of the American republic. The textbook I have chosen emphasizes the contemporary politics and I will supplement this with history to help you connect the two together. The text revolves around three themes: 1) politics is conflictual, 2) process matters, and 3) politics is everywhere. We will weave these through our discussions semester. In addition to reading a text, we will read a variety of historical and contemporary texts and view some video.

My goal in recent years has been to try to talk less in class and have students do more. This will be a work in progress and is challenging for two reasons: I like to talk and get paid for it; and this is a largish class with 40ish students. If we work together, we can make it happen. There will be some lecture, but I hope to keep the class active. Simulations are a major component of this course. In addition there will be discussion, group work, individual work, and the use of video, and other resources in class when possible. I will do my best to vary what happens in class to keep things interesting. I am interested in your ideas and questions; your input is desired and encouraged.

WHAT I WILL HELP YOU LEARN THIS SEMESTER

By the end of the semester, I hope that you—my students—can:

- Understand key issues and concepts of the American political founding;
- Understand key issues and concepts in modern American government;
- Understand arguments made about American government;
- Write clearly about American government, using appropriate language, developing a clear thesis, and supporting that thesis with evidence.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Classroom Human Ecology 132, TTh 11:00 a.m.–12:45 p.m.

In Person Schumacher 14J. 607-436-3272. Office Hours: M 12:30 p.m. — 2:30 p.m., Th 4:00 p.m. — 5:00 p.m. and at other times announced weekly (and by appointment, we will find a time that works)

Electronic bill.wilkerson@oneonta.edu — app.gradecraft.com — blackboard.oneonta.edu
Sign up for remind.com as noted in class for text messages.

Department Schumacher 10. -3522. Secretary: to be announced. Hours: to be announced M–F.

BOOKS TO PURCHASE

The book has been ordered through the campus bookstore. It is also available online. Please buy this edition.

Bianco, William T. and David T. Canon. *American Politics Today, 6th ed, essentials*. W. W. Norton, 2018. ISBN: 978-0-393-69608-0.

Coby, John Patrick. *The Constitutional Convention of 1787: Constructing the American Republic*. W. W. Norton, 2018. ISBN: 978-0-393-64090-8.

Note: Other reading is required and will be distributed in class or through Blackboard.

TOPIC OUTLINE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

The course outline lists dates, general topics, and textbook reading for the semester. Details for each of the four sections of the course will be placed on Blackboard and handed out in class if there is interest. *Two notes: 1) Additional short readings may be assigned for many Section 2 topics and will be added as we move along during the semester. 2) I reserve the right to alter this outline if necessary.*

Dates	Topics we will cover	textbook reading
Section 1: Foundations		
T 8/27	What have I gotten myself into?	
Th 8/29 & T 9/3	1. Understanding American politics	ch. 1
Th 9/5 — T 9/24	2. The US Constitution: Reacting to the Past (we will write a US Constitution)	ch. 2; Coby; the Articles of Confederation; the Constitution
Th 9/26	3. Federalism	ch. 3
T 10/1 — T 10/8	4. Civil liberties & civil rights	ch. 4 & ch. 5
Th 10/10	Section 1 examlet	
T 10/15	No class	
Section 2: Contemporary American Politics		
Th 10/17 — T 10/22	5. Congress	ch. 10
Th 10/24	6. Public opinion & the media: how do Americans form ideas about politics?	ch. 6
T 10/29	7. Elections: money and politics, how do elections work	ch. 8
Th 10/31	8. Political parties	ch. 7
T 11/5	9. Interest groups	ch. 9
Th 11/7	CongSim 1: caucus & committee meetings	
T 11/12 & T 11/19	10. The presidency and the executive branch	ch. 11
Th 11/14	CongSim 2: committee meetings	
Th 11/21 & T 11/26	11. The courts	ch. 13
Th 11/28	No class: Thanksgiving break	
T 12/3	Section 2 examlet	
Th 12/5	CongSim 3: House Debates	
Th 12/12 11:00AM-1:30PM	CongSim 4: House Debates	

EARNING POINTS

In POLS 121 US Government you can choose the grade you want to aspire to, and you have some choice in the assignments you will complete to earn that grade. Everyone in this class starts with zero points. Every assignment successfully completed will add to your point total, you can never lose points. Also, there are a number of opportunities throughout the semester to earn points, and these opportunities come from different kinds of assignments. To do well in POLS 121 US Government—to earn a B or above—you will need to do multiple things well. Below are the point totals required for each grade level.

Point total requirements

A	27,800 or more total points
A-	26,100
B+	24,400
B	23,500
B-	22,200 (note: to earn a grade of B- you must successfully complete RttP and CongSim)
C+	19,600
C	18,700 (note: to earn a grade of C you must successfully complete RttP)
C-	17,600
D+	14,500
D	13,700
E	13,699 or fewer total points

ASSIGNMENTS (WAYS TO EARN POINTS)

Blackboard quizzes. There will be 4-6 multiple choice quizzes posted on Blackboard during the semester on groups of topics. One hundred twenty-five questions worth 50 points each will be asked during the semester for 6,250 available points. Questions will primarily come from the textbook, but will also occasionally be drawn from lectures and other materials used in the section such as additional readings, films, or web sites. Each quiz will be opened after class on the last day of a section and remain open for 48 hours unless otherwise noted. There is no maximum on the points you can earn through quizzes.

Attendance. Earn 50 points for each class, not including examlet days. You can earn a total of 1,250 points total.

Examlets. On two dates noted in the topic outline optional in-class exams will be held, made up of short essay questions, examlets. Each examlet is worth 750 points. Questions will be distributed in advance. There will be a total of 10 examlets. Examlets will be graded on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis using guidelines distributed in advance.

Explorations. Extend your learning by exploring concepts from the course by leaving the classroom. Visiting a government meeting and interviewing people are examples. These assignments, graded on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis, are worth 2,500 points each.

Reacting to the Past: The Constitutional Convention of 1787. Over the three-plus weeks of class, early in the semester, we will be examining the US Constitution in significant detail by taking on the roles of the founders and creating a constitution. While you will learn about the goals and motivations of the founders, we may not end up with the same constitution they did! You will be assessed in a series of assignments including a survey, a character investigation worksheet, a readings worksheet, two writing assignments, participation (including speaking in front of the class), and an end of activity reflection. Except for participation these assignments will be graded on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis. This simulation is worth a total of 7,500 points. *To have the possibility of earning a C or above, you must earn at least 6,000 points on this assignment and attempt all assignments.*

Congressional Simulation. During the second half of the semester we will be simulating Congress. You will play the role of a member of Congress and write legislation, seek to influence colleagues, and gain passage of your bills. You will also think about the district you represent, examine interest groups that are relevant to your work, and communicate with your constituents. Except for participation these assignments will be graded on a

satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis. This simulation is worth a total of 7.500 points. *To have the possibility of earning a C or above, you must earn at least 6,000 points on this assignment and attempt all assignments.*

GRADING OF ASSIGNMENTS

With the exception of the Blackboard quizzes and some elements of the Reacting to the Past and the Congressional Simulation, this course will use a grading system, specifications grading, this semester, that is likely new to you. While the assignments will be similar to assignments I have used in the past, and that you see in other courses that you are taking, how they are assessed and how they will be counted towards earning a grade are likely different. Below I will explain specifications grading and finally second chances—tokens—an important part of specifications grading.

Specifications grading¹

Specifications grading is an approach to grading created by Linda Nilson, the Founding Director of the Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation at Clemson University. Specifications grading includes three primary elements:

1. Assignments are graded as Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory where the requirements for Satisfactory are set at approximately B-level. Grading is not Pass/Fail. In order to earn credit, work must be high quality and must meet all the specifications the instructor has outlined for it. The instructor provides a clear list of the specifications required for credit for each assignment.
2. Specifications grading builds in opportunities to revise unsatisfactory work and other opportunities for flexibility with tokens. Students begin the course with a fixed number of virtual tokens and may be able to redeem tokens for opportunities to revise and resubmit unsatisfactory work, to retake an exam, or to receive an extension on an assignment deadline.
3. Course grades are assigned on the basis of bundles of assignments that a student has satisfactorily completed. Higher grades require the completion of bundles with more work and more challenging work.

Why use specifications grading?

Specifications grading offers several advantages over traditional weighted-average grading approaches. Specifications grading:

- Makes it easy for students and instructors to track progress and to identify students' strengths and weaknesses.
- Promotes a clear connection between class performance and specific learning outcomes.
- Provides a mechanism for improving unsatisfactory work.
- Rewards mastery instead of a “hunt for partial credit” strategy.
- Provides students with clear information about how much work the letter grade they want to achieve demands from the first day of class.

Want to learn more?

The resources below provide more detailed discussions of specifications grading:

Nilson, Linda. 2014. *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Nilson, Linda. 2016. “Yes, Virginia, There’s a Better Way to Grade.” InsideHigherEd.com January 19. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/01/19/new-ways-grade-more-effectively-essay> (June 6, 2017).

¹ This description is borrowed from: Blackstone, Bethany and Elizabeth Oldmixon. Specifications Grading in Political Science, *Journal of Political Science Education*, 15:2, 191-205.

Talbert, Robert. 2014. "4 p 1 Interview: Linda Nilson." The Chronicle Blog Network: Casting Out Nines, November 25. <http://www.chronicle.com/blognetwork/castingoutnines/2014/11/25/41-interview-linda-nilson/> (June 6, 2017).

SECOND CHANCES

All or nothing grading can be stressful, so to ease stress, and to encourage you to try out skills that are at the edge of your comfort zone, and most of all, to maximize opportunities for learning, every student starts the course with three (3) virtual tokens that can be "exchanged" for some leniency or opportunities for revision. Using a token will allow a student to do one of the following:

- resubmit an unsatisfactory assignment within the deadline agreed upon (usually within one week of a grade being assigned);
- earn full credit for an assignment turned in with 72 hours of due date/time (unless it is noted you can't); or
- resubmit a quiz with a brief window.

You can earn two additional tokens by attending and writing a reflection on the Common Read (9/23 at 7:00 p.m. in Dewar Arena). You may also earn a token by attending campus events and writing reflections. Note though that you must have a token available at the time the assignment is graded.

EXAMPLES OF PATHS TO AN A

The traditional:

Rock Reacting to the Past (7500)

Do a great job on the CongSim (7500)

Do well on quizzes, you earn 90% of the points (5400 points)

In class every day (1250)

Complete five examlet questions (3750)

Complete one exploration assignment (2500)

$$7500 + 7500 + 5400 + 1250 + 3750 + 2500 = 27900 \text{ total points}$$

I'm not that great at quizzes and I hate exams:

Rock Reacting to the Past (7500)

Do a great job on the CongSim (7500)

Do well on quizzes, you earn 75% of the points (4500 points)

In class every day (1250)

Complete three exploration assignments (7500)

$$7500 + 7500 + 4500 + 1250 + 7500 = 28,250 \text{ total points}$$

Hopefully you get the idea. There are several paths to an A. It is up to you to decide which you choose. And there are similar variations if your goal is a B or a C. *GradeCraft has a tool to help you plan how to move forward.*

CLASS PREPARATION AND STUDY RESOURCES

Go to the class preparation and study resources folder of Blackboard for links.

A FEW RULES AND OTHER NOTES

1. Come to class and come to class prepared. Your presence and participation are important your success.
2. Keep up with the class using Blackboard, Gradecraft, text messages, and other media as appropriate.
3. Be considerate of others. Be respectful in discussion. Please put away your cell phone unless asked to use it for class.
4. Make your work your own. Dishonest work will be punished to the full extent that the Student Handbook allows.
5. Technology fails sometimes. Servers go down, files corrupt. Start early and backup your work. You are responsible for getting work in on time and for sending me readable files in the manner required.
6. Please discuss your disability accommodations with me early in the semester. And you should use these accommodations until it is clear that you don't need them!
7. I only check my Oneonta email, not my Blackboard email. Include a subject in emails to me.
8. Please put away your cell phone unless asked to use it for class.

STUDENT WELL BEING

The well-being of students is centrally important. If you are facing any challenges related to your mental or physical health or obstacles related to food or housing security, there are caring people on campus who are there to help. Please don't hesitate to contact me to assist you in finding that help and insuring that you are in the best possible position to succeed. Come by the office; send me a text or an email.

CATALOG DESCRIPTION

An introductory overview of American national government: constitutionalism, political institutions and processes, and political behavior. Recommended for students who want a basic course in American government or who plan to take 200-level POLS courses.

EMERGENCY EVACUATION/SHELTER-IN-PLACE PROCEDURES

In the event of an emergency evacuation (i.e., fire or other emergency), classes meeting in this building are directed to reassemble at the lobby of IRC so that all persons can be accounted for. Complete details of the College's emergency evacuation, shelter-in-place and other emergency procedures can be found at <http://www.oneonta.edu/security/>.

COLLEGE ADA (AMERICAN WITH DISABILITIES ACT) STATEMENT

Accessibility Resources is committed to creating an accessible educational experience for students with disabilities.

We partner with students, faculty, and other college resources to design accessible environments and to coordinate accommodations for entitled students under federal legislation. In doing so we affirm the worth of each individual and the spirit of diversity inherent in an inclusive college.

We encourage self-advocacy for students and will assist faculty in meeting the needs of all SUNY Oneonta students. For more information go to <https://suny.oneonta.edu/accessibility-resources>.

INTERESTED IN MAJORING OR MINORING IN POLITICAL SCIENCE, INTERNATIONAL STUDIES OR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STUDIES?

Come see me or go by the Department office. We would love to have you.

We also have excellent student run clubs in political science and pre-law. See Campus Connection for details.