

Power and Politics in America
POL-UA 0300
Fall 2024
Professor Sanford Clark Gordon

I. Introduction

The aim of this course is to provide students with a variety of analytical concepts and approaches useful for understanding domestic political institutions and behavior in the United States. In the first part of the course, we discuss foundational normative and positive issues in U.S. politics, grounding this discussion in an in-depth examination of the political antecedents and political consequences of the 1787 Constitution. Special attention will be paid to issues of political and social equality (and inequality) and political stability (and instability). Next, we consider political participation and mass behavior: how private citizens and groups become informed about and seek to influence public policy; the nature of American political culture; the formation of public attitudes and preferences; the structure of political conflict; and the electoral connection between politicians and citizens. Finally, we examine the formal and informal institutions of governance in the U.S. and their implications for the creation of public policy and the maintenance or mitigation of inequality.

The goal of this course is to provide a conceptual framework in which to *comprehend*, and not merely *describe*, U.S. politics. With this in mind, we will delve into concepts such as coordination problems, public goods, and collective action; preference aggregation and the median voter theorem; delegation, representation, and accountability; agenda control; and inter-branch bargaining. A second goal of the course is to characterize the extent to which the political system of the U.S. is or isn't *dysfunctional*. What systematic criteria can we use to evaluate the functioning of a political system? What are sources of dysfunction, and can they be remedied?

II. Contact and Meeting Information

Professor

Sanford Clark Gordon
19 West 4th Street, Room 329
Office Hours: Monday 9-11am, or by appointment
E-mail: sanford.gordon@nyu.edu

Assistants in Instruction

Munroe Kim mk8513@nyu.edu (Office Hours Friday 10am-12pm, Room 319)
Lanie Mansfield dtm9732@nyu.edu (Office Hours Thursday 9-11am, Room 318)
David McGrath dm4947@nyu.edu (Office Hours Thursday 10am-12pm, Room 416)

Lectures

Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:00-3:15pm, 36 E 8th St (Cantor Film Center), Room 102

III. Readings

1. The following is the required textbook for the course:

- Theodore Lowi, Benjamin Ginsberg, Kenneth Shepsle, Stephen Ansolabehere, and Hahrie Han. *American Government: Power and Purpose*, 17th edition (“LG”)

In an effort to minimize costs, we will be using the NYU bookstore’s Follett ACCESS initiative. You will receive an email from "BryteWave" with the instructions for accessing the material. The cost of the book is \$61.25, which will be added as a “book charge” to your bursar bill. If you choose to find your course materials elsewhere, you must login here to the student portal and opt out of the program by September 18th. If you do not opt out by this date, you will be charged.

2. Last year, an alumna of this class (Jamila Ruddock ’22) and I published a short eBook, which is available on Kindle [here](#) and Apple Books [here](#).

- Gordon, Sanford C., and Jamila Ruddock. 2023. *What Your Professor Thinks You Already Know About US Politics* (“GR”)

A few notes: First, different parts appear throughout the syllabus below. But you might also consider taking advantage of the light reading load in the first week and just looking over the whole thing – formatted as a regular book the main content is about 46 pages total. Second, we published this directly on Kindle and Apple to keep the price down (it’s currently \$7.99). Finally, to avoid any conflict of interest, 100% of royalties from the first *N* sales (where *N* is our class size) starting on September 3 will go to Jamila.

3. Other readings can be found on NYU Brightspace (“BR”) or online (“ON”).

IV. Student Responsibilities and Course Grading

Formal Course Requirements

Recitation participation: 15%

Recitations will cover topics discussed in class and in the readings. You are expected to have completed *all* of the assigned readings up to and including those assigned for a particular recitation, and to attend *all* recitations. Additionally:

- In **Weeks 4-5**, we will be distributing a take home *abbreviated mock exam* featuring a handful of questions like those that appear on the midterm and the final. The purpose of this exercise (which won’t count toward your actual grade) is to give you a sense of what questions and strong answers on exams look like and as a diagnostic for your grasp of the material up to that point. The mock exam will be discussed in recitation.
- Several components of the *research assignment* will be done in recitation (see below)

Midterm examination 25%

The midterm examination will be held in class on **Thursday, October 24**, and will cover the first half of the course.

Research assignment: 15%

A brief research exercise is due by the beginning of lecture on **Tuesday, November 26**. The topic will be distributed following the midterm. You must participate in the recitation components of the research assignment to receive full credit.

Final examination 35%

According to the most recent information from the registrar’s office, the final examination will be held on **Tuesday, December 17** from **2-3:50pm**. Roughly two-thirds of the exam will cover material not covered on the first exam. The remaining third will

review those earlier topics. *Make sure not to make travel arrangements that might prevent you from taking the final exam at the scheduled time.*

Unannounced in-class exercises 10%

These quick (2-3 minute) and very basic exercises will be administered periodically. You must be present to complete the exercise and receive credit. To allow for unforeseeable emergencies and health issues, we will drop your lowest exercise score.

V. Principles and Policies

The Classroom Environment

If you take nothing else away from this course, I hope that it is the ability to apply an analytical perspective to politics in the U.S. This entails a rigorous commitment to logic and evidence and not a knee-jerk reliance on our own ideological predispositions (whatever they may be). Of course, politics is about disagreement and conflict concerning fundamental issues about which all of us have strong views. With this in mind, let us resolve as a community to treat one another at all times with dignity and respect.

Laptops and Tablets in Class

There is substantial evidence that students who use laptops to take notes in class learn less and get worse grades (although there are of course exceptions). These devices can also be a distraction to *other students*. Accordingly, I *strongly encourage you* to take notes with pen and paper. (I consider a device such as a tablet to be “pen and paper” if it’s used with pen/stylus input and lies flat on the writing surface.) If you feel you must use a laptop or tablet with keyboard to take notes, please do not sit in the first four rows of the lecture hall.

Academic Integrity

All of the work you do in this course is expected to be your own. *Absolutely no cheating or plagiarism* (using someone else’s words or ideas without proper attribution) *will be tolerated*. All ideas not your own must be properly cited. Any cases of cheating or plagiarism will be handled according to university policy. For more information on that policy, see [here](#).

Missed Exams and Late Papers

Exams: Exceptions in emergency situations are inevitable, but in general, students missing an exam will receive a grade of zero. If you must miss an exam, please contact your teaching assistant *before* the scheduled test time, and if the excuse is justified (such as in cases of documented illness, family/personal emergencies, or time zone-related challenges), we will schedule a make-up.

Research assignment: In general, students will be penalized 1/3 of a grade (e.g., from a B+ to a B) per day late. If you know you will be late, it is in your best interest to contact your teaching assistant *prior to* the deadline, since the penalty may be relaxed in extenuating circumstances.

Grading-Related Grievances

Students who feel that an error has been made in the grading of one of their assignments should first consult their teaching assistant. If the issue is not resolved, a student may submit a brief, one paragraph description of the grievance to the professor. Please keep in mind that any formal re-

grading will be conducted *de novo* (i.e., without reference to the original grade), and could potentially result in a loss of points.

Religious Observance and Class Attendance

NYU's [Policy](#) on Academic Accommodations for Religious Holidays and Observances states that members of any religious group may, without penalty, absent themselves from academic obligations when required in compliance with their religious obligations. While we strive not to schedule assignment deadlines or exams on major religious holidays, please don't hesitate to bring your need for an accommodation to our attention should it arise.

Special Accommodations

New York University is committed to providing equal educational opportunity and participation for students with disabilities. It is the University's policy that no qualified student with a disability be excluded from participating in any University program or activity, denied the benefits of any University program or activity, or otherwise subjected to discrimination with regard to any University program or activity. Students requesting accommodations must document their disability with the [Moses Center for Students with Disabilities](#).

VI. Weekly Schedule

Part A. Foundations: Analytical, Constitutional, and Cultural

Week 1. Introduction

Tuesday, September 3

Introduction and Orientation

- No assigned readings

Thursday, September 5

Some Fundamental Political Dilemmas

- Bueno de Mesquita, Ethan. 2016. "The Role of Models." In *Political Economy for Public Policy*, pp. 5-7 (BR)
- LG, pp. 4-23 (Chapter 1: "Making Sense of Government and Politics" and "Five Principles of Politics")

Recitations, Monday, September 2 to Friday, September 6

Recitations Will Not Meet in the First Week

Week 2. Constitutionalism and Public Authority: Preliminaries

Tuesday, September 10

Constitutional Governance: Practical and Philosophical Foundations

- James Madison, "Vices of the Political System of the United States," April 1787 (BR)
- The [Articles of Confederation](#) and the [original U.S. Constitution](#) (not including the Bill of Rights or subsequent amendments) (ON; also available in Appendix of LG)
- Essential Background: GR chapters 2 (sections 2.1 to 2.4) and 3 (sections 3.1-3.5)
- LG pp. 44-70 (Chapter 2: "The Second Founding: From Compromise to Constitution," "The Constitution," and "The Fight for Ratification: Federalists versus Antifederalists.")

Thursday, September 12*(Compound) Republicanism*

- *The Federalist*, Nos. 10, 15, 39, and 46 (ON)
- Brutus (Robert Yates?), “To the Citizens of the State of New-York” (BR)
- Essential Background: GR chapter 3 (section 3.6)
- LG, pp. 80-108 (Chapter 3: “Introduction” and “Who Does What? Federalism and Institutional Jurisdictions”)

Recitations, Monday September 9 to Friday, September 13*Getting Comfortable with Analytical Models of Politics*

- No additional readings

Week 3. Constitutionalism, Governance, and Public Authority: Conflicts & TradeoffsTuesday, September 17*Self-Enforcing Constitutionalism: Shared Norms, Countervailing Forces, or Recipe for Stagnation?*

- *The Federalist*, Nos. 48, 49, and 51 (ON)
- Selection from Azari, Julia R., and Jennifer K. Smith. 2012. “Unwritten Rules: Informal Institutions in Established Democracies.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 10: 43-49 (BR)
- Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*, pp. 20-26 (BR)

Thursday, September 19*Evaluating the Constitution and American Democracy: Some Preliminary Assessments*

- Address and Reasons of Dissent of the Minority of the Convention of Pennsylvania to their Constituents (BR)
- Dahl, Robert. 2002. *How Democratic is the American Constitution*, ch. 2 (BR)
- Svobik, Milan. 2019. “Polarization vs. Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy* 30: 20-32 (BR)

Recitations, Monday, September 16 to Friday, September 20*Does Federalism Moderate or Undermine Democracy?*

- West, Darrell M. “[Why Federalism Has Become Risky for American Democracy.](#)” Brookings Institution “Fixgov” Project, September 23, 2022 (ON)
- Grumbach, Jake. 2023. “Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding.” *American Political Science Review* 117: 967-984 (BR, just read pp. 967-974, focusing on the motivation and the results and not the statistical model)

Part B. Political Behavior**Week 4. Political Culture and Political Attitudes**Tuesday, September 24*Political Culture*

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, selections (BR)
- Doherty, Carroll, Jocelyn Kiley, Nida Asheer, and Calvin Jordan. 2022. “Americans’ Views of Government: Decades of Distrust, Enduring Support for its Role.” Pew

Research Center Report, pp. 4-21 (BR). If you're interested, a link to the full report may be found [here](#).

Thursday, September 26

Attitude Formation and the Mass Public

- LG, pp. 438-470, 477-493 (Chapter 10: "Introduction", "What Is Public Opinion?", "Origins and Nature of Opinion", "Shaping Opinion: Political Leaders, Private Groups, and the Media", "Measuring Public Opinion")

Recitations, Monday, September 23 to Friday, September 27

Is the Fabric of American Political Culture Fraying?

- Cramer, Katherine. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment*, pp. 15-34 (BR)
- Doherty, Carroll, Jocelyn Kiley, and Nida Asheer. 2024. "[The Political Values of Harris and Trump Supporters](#)." Pew Research Center (ON). Stop at "Foreign policy values and the 2024 election." Be sure to click on some of the links under the two headings entitled, "And here is updated data on Harris and Trump supporters' view about:"

Week 5. Political Attitudes Continued

Tuesday, October 1

Citizen (In)Competence

- LG, pp. 470-477 (Chapter 10: "Public Opinion and Political Knowledge")
- Achen, Christopher, and Larry Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists*, pp. 36-40 (BR)

Thursday, October 3

Holiday – Class Will Not Meet

Recitations, Monday, September 30 to Friday, October 4

Why is Black Partisanship Homogeneous when Black Public Opinion is Heterogeneous?

- Johnson, Theodore R. "How the Black Vote Became a Monolith." *New York Times*, September 16, 2020 (BR)
- White, Ismail K., and Chryl N. Laird. 2020. *Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior*, ch. 3 (BR)

Week 6. Participation and Elections

Tuesday, October 8

Mass Participation

- LG, pp. 493-495, 500-518, 532-540, 591-601 (Chapter 10: "How Does Public Opinion Influence Government Policy?"; Chapter 11: "Introduction", "Institutions of Elections", "How Voters Decide" [everything before the "Spatial Issues subheading], "Parties in the Electorate")

Thursday, October 10

Campaigns and Elections: Mobilizing or Persuading?

- Vavreck, Lynn. 2009. *The Message Matters*, ch. 2 (BR)
- Essential Background: GR, chapter 4 (section 4.1)

- LG, pp. 547-570 (Chapter 11: “Campaigns: Money, Media, and Grass Roots”, “The 2020 and 2022 Elections”, “Conclusion: Elections and Accountability”)

Recitations, Monday, October 7 to Friday, October 11

How Effective are Strategies of Demobilization? Does it Matter?

- Lopez, German. “[A New Study Finds Voter ID Laws Don’t Reduce Voter Fraud – or Voter Turnout.](#)” *Vox.com*, February 21, 2019 (ON). If you’re adventurous, the published paper is [here](#)
- Mullainathan, Sendhil. 2020. “[For Racial Justice, Employees Need Paid Hours Off for Voting.](#)” *New York Times*, June 12, 2020 (ON)

Week 7. The Media

Tuesday, October 15

Legislative Monday – Class Will Not Meet

Thursday, October 17

The Media and American Politics

- LG, pp. 682-697 (Chapter 14: “The Media as a Political Institution”)

Recitations, Monday, October 14 to Friday, October 18

Does Social Media Poison Citizenship?

- Lewis-Kraus, Gideon. “How Harmful is Social Media?” *New Yorker*, June 3, 2022 (BR)
- Nyhan, Brendan, et. al. 2023. “Like-Minded Sources on Facebook are Prevalent but not Polarizing.” *Nature* 620: 137-144 (BR)

Week 8. Catch-up, Review, and Exam

Tuesday, October 22

Catch-Up and Review

- No assigned readings

Thursday, October 24

Midterm Examination

Recitations, Monday, October 21 to Friday, October 25

Recitations will not meet

Week 9. Parties

Tuesday, October 29

The Structure of Party Competition

- Essential Background: GR, chapter 4 (section 4.2)
- LG, pp. 572-590, 601-607 (Chapter 12: “Why Do Political Parties Form?”, “What Functions Do Political Parties Perform?”, “Parties in Government,” “Parties as Institutions”)

Thursday, October 31

On the Origins and Consequences of Partisan Polarization

- McCarty, Nolan. 2019. *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, ch. 5 (BR)
- Azari, Julia. “[Weak Parties and Strong Partisanship are a Bad Combination.](#)” *Vox.com*, November 3, 2016 (ON)

Recitations, Monday, October 28 to Friday, November 1

What are the Political and Policy Consequences of Partisan Polarization?

- Hall, Andrew. 2015. “What Happens When Extremists win Primaries?” *American Political Science Review* 109(1), 18-42. Just read pp. 18-25 (BR)
- McCarty, Nolan. 2019. *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*, ch. 7 (BR)

Part C. The Institutions of Governance

Week 10. Representation and Power in Congress

Tuesday, November 5

On the Nature of Representation

- LG, pp. 224-231, 239-242, 519-527 (Chapter 6: “Representation” and the “Congressional Districts” and “Gerrymandering” subheadings of “The Electoral System”; Chapter 11: “Where Americans Vote: Electoral Districts”)
- *Congressional Quarterly* synopsis of *Rucho v. Common Cause* (2019) (BR)
- Howe, Amy. 2023. “[Supreme Court rules against North Carolina Republicans over election law theory.](#)” *ScotusBlog*, June 27, 2023 (ON)

Thursday, November 7

Election Post-Mortem & Legislative Preferences and Legislative Agenda Control

- LG, **skim** 261-281 (Chapter 6: “Rules of Lawmaking: How A Bill Becomes A Law”)
- Lee, Frances. 2016. *Insecure Majorities*, selections from chs. 2 and 3 (BR)

Recitations, Monday, November 4 to Friday, November 8

Part 1. What Explains the Gender Gap in Congressional Candidate Recruitment?

- Lawless, Jennifer L. 2015. “Female Candidates and Legislators.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 18:349-366 (BR)

Part 2. In-Class Research Component

Week 11. Congress Continued; Executive Authority

Tuesday, November 12

Legislative Organization and Interbranch Bargaining

- LG, pp. 242-261 (Chapter 6: “The Organization of Congress”)
- Buck, Brendan. “[The Freedom Caucus Started Believing in the Myth of Its Own Power.](#)” *The New York Times*, April 22, 2024 (ON)

Thursday, November 14

Formal Sources of Executive Authority

- LG, pp. 291-310 (Chapter 7: “The Constitutional Origins and Powers of the Presidency”)
- Krehbiel, Keith. 1998. *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*, pp. 20-39 (BR)

Recitations, Monday, November 11 to Friday, November 15

Part 1. The Art of Lawmaking

- Pelosi, Nancy. 2024. *The Art of Power*, pp. 149-176 (BR)

Part 2. In-Class Research Component

Week 12. The Presidency and the Executive Branch

Tuesday, November 19

The Institutional Presidency

- LG, pp. 310-336 (Chapter 7: “The Rise of Presidential Government”, “Presidential Government”)

Thursday, November 21

Bureaucracy: Selection, Incentives, and Control

- LG, pp. 345-375 (Chapter 8: “Why Bureaucracy?”, “How is the Executive Branch Organized?”, and “The Problem of Bureaucratic Control”)
- Binder, Sarah, and Forrest Maltzman. “[Abolishing Chevron Could Undermine, Not Empower, Congress.](#)” *Good Authority*, July 10, 2024 (ON)
- Wagner, Erich. “[Trump Vows to ‘Shatter the Deep State,’ Revive Schedule F and Move More Agencies out of DC.](#)” *Government Executive*, March 21, 2023 (ON)

Recitations, Monday November 18 to Friday November 22

Part 1. Trump vs. United States

- Read Oyez’s [case summary](#) (ON)
- Feuer, Alan. “[In Immunity Decision, Clashing Views of the Nature of Politics.](#)” *New York Times*, July 3, 2024 (ON)

Part 2. In-Class Research Component

Week 13. Organized Interests

Tuesday, November 26

BRIEF RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT DUE

- LG, ch. 13
- Fowler, Anthony, Haritz Garro, and Jörg Spenkuch. 2020. “Quid Pro Quo? Corporate Returns to Campaign Contributions” *Cato Institute Research Brief* (BR)

Thursday, November 28

Thanksgiving Holiday – Class Will Not Meet

Recitations, Monday, November 25 to Friday, November 29

Recitations will not meet the week of Thanksgiving Break

Week 14. The Judiciary and the Regulation of State-Citizen Relations

Tuesday, December 3

The Least Dangerous Branch?

- Essential Background: Review GR, Chapter 3 (section 3.4)
- LG, pp. 402-427 (Chapter 9: “How Courts Work as Political Institutions”, “The Power of Judicial Review”, “The Supreme Court in Action”, and “Judicial Decision Making.”)
- *The Federalist*, No. 78 (ON)

- *Marbury v. Madison* (BR)

Thursday, December 5

The Citizen and the State

- LG, ch. 4

Recitations, Monday, December 2 to Friday, December 6

Civil Liberties and the Politics of Policing

- United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division. 2015. "[Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department.](#)" Washington, DC: USDOJ. Read the report summary, pp. 1-6 (ON)
- Sibila, Nick. "[Bipartisan Bill in Congress would End 'Nonjudicial' Civil Forfeiture.](#)" *Forbes*, March 19, 2023 (ON)
- Pew Research, "[Trust in America: Do Americans Trust the Police?](#)" Video, January 5, 2022 (ON)

Week 15. Inequality; Wrapping Up

Tuesday, December 10

Inequalities

- LG, ch. 5
- *Congressional Quarterly* synopsis of *Shelby County v. Holder* (BR)
- Howe, Amy. "[Supreme Court Strikes Down Affirmative Action Programs in College Admissions.](#)" *ScotusBlog*, June 29, 2023 (ON)

Thursday, December 12

Conclusion

Recitations, Monday, December 9 to Friday, December 13

Optional Review for Final Exam

Tuesday, December 17 from 2-3:50pm

Final Examination