

# American Government (PLS 102-02) Fall 2013

**Professor:** Whitt Kilburn, Ph.D.

**Email:** kilburnw@mail.gvsu.edu

**Class Time and Location:** 2:30 pm - 3:45 pm, Tuesday and Thursday, MAK D1233

**Office:** 1103 AuSable Hall (Political Science Department)

**Office Hours:** At AuSable 1103, Tuesday and Thursday: 9:00-10:00am, 1:00 - 2:00pm. And by appointment. Virtual office hours anytime I am logged in to GVSU Gmail (mail.gvsu.edu) Chat.

**Course Website:** <http://mybb.gvsu.edu>. Blackboard is the main course website. Another site, hosted by MIT will be used for sharing and commenting on PDF copies of some reading assignments. You will receive an email invitation to join it.

**Course Objectives:** This 3-credit course is a broad introduction to the major themes in contemporary United States (U.S.) government and politics. We will study how governing institutions work, and how these institutions affect the behavior of American citizens and officials (and vice versa). The overall course objective is to provide you with a foundation of knowledge to critically appraise governance and the exercise of political power.

## Required Course Texts:

Morone, J. and R. Kersh. 2013. *By the People: Debating American Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This textbook provides an overview of American government institutions and the behavior of individuals within each one. To do well in the course, you must keep up with the weekly reading assignments to be completed by each assigned class period. We will not discuss every idea from the book, but class time will complement the assigned chapters.

Dahl, R. A. 2003. *How Democratic is the American Constitution?*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dahl's book is a series of eight essays, revolving around the following question: "*Why should we feel bound today by a document produced more than two centuries ago by a group of fifty-five mortal men, actually signed by only thirty nine, a fair number of whom were slaveholders, and adopted in only thirteen states by the votes of fewer than two thousand men, all of whom are long since dead and mainly forgotten?*" (p. 2). The essays range from explaining what the undemocratic aspects of the Constitution are, how they got there, and whether the Constitution should be changed to provide for greater political equality among citizens. Along the way, Dahl compares the U.S. Constitution to other constitutions around the world.

## Required Other Reading:

Various essays and newspaper articles.

As essential to the class as the books are various essays, U.S. Supreme Court case excerpts, and news media articles on other subjects. The syllabus contains links to some of the articles, listed below on various dates throughout the semester. (On the electronic PDF version of the syllabus, active, clickable URLs provide links to the supplementary readings.)

Please keep up with current events — make it a habit of reading a news source with extensive coverage of American politics. Try *The New York Times*, <http://www.nyt.com>, *The*

*Christian Science Monitor* <http://www.csmonitor.com> or *The Washington Post*, <http://postpolitics.com>.

## Our Tuesday–Thursday schedule

Class activities will vary, but will follow a regular schedule. You should take an online quiz covering an assigned chapter of the *By the People* textbook. You should come to class prepared to discuss the assigned reading. And you should *always* bring along a copy of the supplementary reading assignments — the reading apart from the *By the People* textbook. There are two midsemester exams, a final exam, and one essay to write. From in-class discussions, homework, and various in-class activities, your active participation will be required.

**Quizzes:** Quizzes on the *By the People* textbook must be completed by the beginning of class on the assigned day, Tuesday unless otherwise noted in the syllabus. Quizzes are open book, open notes, and untimed, hosted online in Blackboard Course Documents. All quizzes can be taken at any time, but no later than the due date. There are no makeups for the quizzes and no excuses granted for technical trouble, so plan ahead.

**Reading Questions:** For most days in which you are assigned supplementary reading (assignments apart from the textbook), you will be expected to complete a series of reading questions or summaries on each assignment. *If directed to prepare responses for turning in*, responses to the questions are due in *typed* hard copy form at the beginning of the assigned class session. Questions may be turned in late, up to one week later, for half (50%) credit.

**Exams:** There will be two midsemester examinations and a final examination. Format varies, but is generally short answer/term identification and essay.

**Essay:** You will write one paper, approximately 4-5 pages (double spaced).

**Oral Presentation:** Working in a group of 2-3 other students, you will prepare a 10-15 minute presentation on an assigned subject in American politics and government. Once class enrollment settles, I will hand out an assignment sheet for the presentation, giving you all the details. Presentations will be delivered at various time points during the semester.

**Other Homework and In-class Activities:** There will be occasional homework assignments, announced in class. In addition, there will be in-class group or individual activities. Some activities will be for “extra credit”. Whether regular or extra, to receive credit for any of the in-class activities, you must be present in class. So it does not matter if you miss class to play soccer, visit your parents, sleep late, go on a class field trip, or go to a job interview. If you are absent for any reason, your credit for the missed work is a zero. But don’t worry too much; missing any one or two activities has no meaningful impact on your grade.

## General Policies and Procedures

There are a few key things you should know about my class policies and expectations of you:

1. While there is no automatic deduction for absences, any absence risks credit for in-class work. I do keep track of tardiness. Please arrive to class on time and actively participate. The class suffers when any student routinely skips class or is apathetic.

2. Now, for the tough part: If you are in class, I expect you to *be in class*. So please do not sit in your desk with your phone open on your lap. If you can't postpone continually monitoring your phone for more than 75 minutes, then skip class and come back when you are ready to do so. The same standards apply to laptop computers. I do not believe that anyone "is only taking notes" on a laptop during class, so if you insist on using one, know that I will assume you are usually watching cat videos rather than "taking notes" .
3. All work must be turned in as directed, either through Blackboard or paper copy in class. Assignments are *never* accepted through email.
4. If you believe you will have trouble with the course, or have difficulty completing the assignments, I encourage you to call an academic counselor at the Advising Resources and Special Programs Unit, 331-3588.

## Grades

Essay: 20%

Midsemester Exams (average of two scores): 30 %

Presentation: 10%

Final Exam: 15%

Homework and Other Assignments <sup>1</sup>: 25%

Unless standardized scores are necessary, numeric grades will be converted to letter grades based on the following scale:

A 93-100	A- 90-92
B+ 87-89	B 84-86
B- 80-83	C+ 76-79
C 72-75	C- 68-71
D+ 64-67	D 60-63
F <60	

**Code of Academic Integrity:** I expect everyone to abide by the GVSU code of conduct regarding academic honesty. (You should consult the student handbook and GVSU bulletin for relevant policies about academic honesty. Be sure to read GVSU Student Code Section 223.01.) If you have any questions about what academic dishonesty is, you should talk to me during office hours.

**Accommodations:** If there is any student in this class who has special needs because of a learning, physical, or other disability, please contact the Disabilities Support Services (DSS) Program at 331-3588. Remember, it is the student's responsibility to request assistance from DSS. In particular, you are responsible for making any necessary alternative testing arrangements with DSS, not me.

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<sup>1</sup>This category contains all other graded assignments, such as *By the People* textbook quizzes, credit for in-class participation, supplementary reading assignments, and film reflections. Graded items are weighted equally and averaged.

## HOW TO SUCCEED IN THIS COURSE

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1. Reflect on the fact that what you learn in this course, and any benefits from your GVSU degree, are proportional to your effort.
  2. Consult expert guidance for learning. A good source is <http://www.csulb.edu/~tstevens/LEARN.htm>.
  3. Attend every class session.
  4. Keep a disciplined schedule to complete all course readings and assignments.
  5. Participate regularly in class discussions.
  6. Talk to me early in the semester during office hours about any concerns or to clarify expectations.
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## SCHEDULE

The schedule outlined in the syllabus is tentative. I may make modifications to the course, depending on the pace at which it progresses. If any changes occur, I will give you advance notice.

*Reading assignments are due by the date above or next to each set of assignments.*

### Learning Objectives

The learning objectives are the minimal learning requirements for each class. Others, particularly those directly relating to the supplementary reading assignments, will be announced in class.

## 1 Course Introduction and The Problem of Cooperation, Coordination, and Collective Action

*Learning Objectives Explain the lesson of the Prisoner's Dilemma for government. Describe, and evaluate the significance of "a fundamental problem of governance", the potential difference between self and group interest. Apply the Prisoner's Dilemma as a metaphor to a real-life situation for understanding the role of government in our lives. Explain the relationship between the One-Point-Game, the Prisoner's Dilemma, and The Tragedy of the Commons. Explain the difference between the single-play and indefinitely repeated Prisoner's Dilemma, and why cooperation emerges from 'rational' behavior in the latter. Differentiate public and private goods. Define free-riding, politics, government, state, power, and authority.*

**Tuesday 8/27 — Thursday 8/29** : Course introduction, discussion. Read Chapters 1-2, *By the People*. Take the BB quizzes, Chapters 1-2 by the end of the week (Friday at 5:00pm).

**Tuesday 9/3** : Labor Day holiday, no class but supplementary assignment:

Multimedia Film Assignment: Watch *Vaccine War*. Click "Watch the Full Program Online" <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/vaccines> You should watch the documentary film and prepare typed responses to the questions: 1) In what way(s) do the issues raised

within the film affect the “fundamental problem of governance” , defined as ‘how to make self-interest at least not inconsistent with the collective interest’, as discussed in class? 2) If a parent’s decision to *not* vaccinate a child is determined by the parent’s ‘values’, in your opinion what values (if any) are legitimate reasons for not getting a child vaccinated? 3) In your own opinion, should vaccinations be required with exceptions only for health? If not, how should the health of the public be safeguarded? (Your response to all three questions as a whole should be approximately 3-4 paragraphs.) *Due: Post your response to these questions to Blackboard Course Documents (Safe Assign) by Wednesday, 9/4, 5:00pm.*

## 2 The Constitution

**Thursday 9/5** : BB Quiz on Chapter 3, The Constitution due by class time! *Please be sure to bring your textbook with you to class, as we will likely refer back to the U.S. Constitution.*

**Learning Objectives** *Identify the parts of the U.S. Constitution describing the structure and powers of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Explain how the Constitution has been ‘democratized’ through amendments. Identify parts of the Constitution and amendments that grant and deny federal and state government power. For each branch of the federal government, describe at least three ways in which it is ‘checked’ or ‘balanced’ by another branch. Explain the key themes of The Federalist 10 and 51, and the objections of some anti-Federalists. Describe current controversy over the powers of Congress and the Executive to conduct war, and how it exemplifies the Constitution’s structure of ‘separate institutions sharing power’. Explain in what ways the Constitution may be described as setting up a system of governance with a status quo bias.*

**Tuesday 9/10** : *The Federalist* #10. Read and comment on the version posted at Nota Bene, <http://nb.mit.edu/f/7897>.

Reading Questions:

1. In your own words — not Madison’s — what are factions? What would you consider a contemporary example of a ‘faction’?
2. Why is impractical or undesirable to remove the causes of factions, and how is it that a majority faction is controlled under the Constitution?
3. In what ways does Madison’s method of controlling factions, whether minority or majority, make governing on behalf of the majority difficult?

**Thursday 9/12** : Read Chapters 1-2 of Dahl.

See set of reading questions below. As announced in class, some will be assigned for credit and you will be responsible for turning in typed responses.

Questions on Chapters 1-2

1. What were the ‘compromises’ or ‘limits’ confronted by the Founders, and why were they important?
2. Identify one or two ‘undemocratic elements’ of the Constitution. Why does Dahl think it matters?

3. What are the major changes in the U.S., either in beliefs or governing institutions, that have altered how the Constitution's governing institutions (in the main text – not the amendments) has functioned?

Questions on Chapter 3-6 *Announced in class.*

Questions on Chapters 7-8

1. At its core, Dahl writes that the Constitution focuses on describing "structures, powers, and rights." In reforming the Constitution, Dahl argues that one aspect is non-negotiable, federalism. Is this the case, or should the U.S. return to a confederal system?
2. The Constitution requires a supermajority of votes to amend the Constitution. But so does the filibuster rule in the Senate for most lawmaking. Some states have experimented with requiring supermajority votes for particular legislation. Is there a justification for requiring a supermajority? (See page 165.) If so, what is it? Should legislatures be required to have a supermajority, for example, before decriminalizing marijuana? Raising taxes? Lowering taxes?
3. Why, according to Dahl, is a "winner-take all" voting system problematic for voter support of a majority party winner? (See page 169). There are alternative voting procedures to "winner take all." What are they, and could Americans adjust to the different procedures?
4. Should the U.S. enact a 600 seat U.S. House of Representatives, based on a Proportional Representation plus Single-Member District electoral system? Why or why not?

**Tuesday 9/17 — Thursday 9/19** : Throughout this week we will read Dahl's book. Chapter assignments will be announced in class.

### 3 Federalism

**Learning Objectives** *Define federalism as a governing system. Explain parts of the Constitutional basis for "duel" and "shared" federalism. Define three different government systems. Contrast aspects of the Articles of Confederation with federalism under the Constitution. Identify the key Constitutional mechanisms responsible for the growth of the federal government in the 20th century, describing the current scope of federalism outlined in Gonzales v. Raich. Explain three 'pros' and 'cons' of federalism.*

**Tuesday 9/24** :BB Quiz due. Read Chapter 4, Federalism, *By the People*.

**Thursday 9/26** : opinions in U.S. Supreme Court case *Gonzales v. Raich (2005)*; <http://nb.mit.edu/f/8036>.

Reading Questions:

1. In the majority opinion, what is the key Constitutional question [the question about the meaning and application of the Constitution] the Court's majority chooses to decide in Gonzales ?
2. Why, according to the Court's majority, is California's medical marijuana program unconstitutional?

3. What are Justice O'Connor's main dissenting concerns with the Court's majority decision in *Gonzales*? Why, according to O'Connor, does the decision threaten the role of states as "laboratories" for governance?
4. Justice Thomas writes a separate dissenting opinion. What is his key concern with the majority opinion?

Obama's treatment of marijuana and federalism: ("Medical Marijuana Target of U.S. Prosecutors"). An op-ed: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/07/opinion/reefer-madness.html>

## 4 Civil Liberties

**Learning Objectives for Liberties and Rights** Conceptually distinguish civil rights from civil liberties. Describe the process of "incorporating" the Bill of Rights and the importance of the 14th Amendment in civil rights and liberties. Explain the origins and controversies surrounding a right to privacy and landmark Supreme Court cases. Describe current standards for the protection of free speech. Explain why the Supreme Court has had difficulty regulating obscenity. Describe principles and current controversies in the free exercise and government establishment of religion. Differentiate three levels of scrutiny, describing how each are applied. Explain the meaning of the separate spheres doctrine, and how the Supreme Court has scrutinized gender discrimination. Describe current principles and cases in the debate over the constitutionality of laws discriminating against homosexuals. Explain the origin of affirmative action, and cite principles that have guided the Supreme Court's treatment of affirmative action in recent years.

**Tuesday 10/1** : Chapter 5 Civil Liberties, *By the People*. BB Quiz due.

**Thursday 10/3** : Excerpts from U.S. Supreme Court opinion in *Florida v. Jardines* (2012). Posted on Nota Bene. Reading Questions announced in class.

## 5 Civil Rights

**Tuesday 10/8** : BB Quiz due. Chapter 6, Civil Rights, *By the People*.

**Thursday 10/10** : Opinions from *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas* (2003), <http://nb.mit.edu/f/8039>.

Reading Questions:

1. What is the constitutional question the Court is considering?
2. Why, according to *Lawrence and Garner*, should the Texas law be overturned — and what does their argument have to do with the idea of "privacy"?
3. In a prior case from the 1980s, *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the Court upheld a similar Georgia law. Why, according to the Court, was the *Bowers* case wrongly decided, and what in your opinion would explain the different outcome between the two cases?

In class we will discuss the issue of civil rights and sexual orientation. For optional reading on the subject, see “A Risky Proposal: Is it too soon to petition the Supreme Court on gay marriage?” by Talbot, M. *The New Yorker*, January 18, 2010 [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/01/18/100118fa\\_fact\\_talbot](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/01/18/100118fa_fact_talbot).

**Tuesday 10/15** : Midsemester Examination I in class, covering *By the People*. Chapters 1-6 plus supplementary reading assignments.

## 6 Public Opinion and Elections

**Learning Objectives** *Explain what public opinion is and the various ingredients, or ‘origins’ of it. Explain Converse’s “levels of conceptualization” and application to current policy issues. Cite recent changes in the American electorate’s party identification, including the gender and religiosity gaps. Define ‘ideology’ and a core difference between ‘liberals’ versus ‘conservatives’. Describe the 4-part explanation for why presidential approval changes over the course of a President’s term in office.*

**Thursday 10/17** : BB Quiz due. Take either Chapter 7 or Chapter 8, *By the People*. Take both for extra credit.

Menand, L. 2004. “The Unpolitical Animal: How Political Science Understands Voters”. *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2004. <http://nb.mit.edu/f/8044>.

Reading Questions:

1. What are the major theories Menand identifies for explaining how voters form opinions about politics?
2. Which theory does Menand describe as a better theory for understanding how Americans are capable of making informed choices?
3. Overall, given the different perspectives reviewed by Menand, to what extent does the evidence suggest Americans are ill equipped to make informed, ‘rational’ judgments about American politics, particularly candidates and parties?

Optional reading on a similar theme: Bartels, L. 2008. *The Wilson Quarterly* “The Irrational Electorate”. [http://www.princeton.edu/~bartels/how\\_stupid.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/~bartels/how_stupid.pdf)

## 7 The Media

**Learning Objectives** *Describe the roles of the news media in American democracy. Explain how federal regulations govern the media. Discuss the factors that encourage the uniformity of political news coverage by the American media. Explain how “partisan neutrality” influences news coverage. Define partisan or ideological slant and explain how it could be measured in news media coverage.*

**Tuesday, 10/22** : BB quiz due. Chapter 9, *By the People*.

**Thursday, 10/24** : Supplementary reading assignment announced in a prior class.

*Essay due by Friday, 10/25 at 5:00 p.m.*



## 8 Political Campaigns

**Learning Objectives** Describe changes in voter turnout over time, and the difference between the ‘VAP’ and ‘VEP’ measures of turnout. Cite 3 major factors affecting whether an individual votes. Explain the origins of the Electoral College and how its current function differs from the origins. Express an informed opinion on the desirability, or potential consequences, of reforming the Electoral College. Explain and contrast the ideas of ‘soft money’ and ‘coordinated spending’, describing key aspects of campaign finance law.

**Tuesday, 10/29** : BB Quiz due. Chapter 10 Campaigns, *By the People*

Optional, but check out the Political Ads at [www.livingroomcandidate.org/](http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/)

**Thursday, 10/31** : Second (Midsemester) Examination in Class.

## 9 Political Parties and Interest Groups

*This week, we will hold class online without meeting physically in the classroom. I will ask you to evaluate how the online classes compare to in-person.*

**Learning Objectives** Explain why the United States is a 2-party system. Contrast accountability and representation, and why in some respects American political parties are considered ‘weak’. Explain the idea of the median voter and why two-party (or candidate) races tend to produce centrism. Contrast proportional representation with an informed opinion on the desirability of promoting a third-party in American politics. Explain the difference between economic and non-economic groups, and why one type is usually more successful at overcoming collective action problems. Explain pluralism and criticisms of it. Define a PAC and what it does.

**Tuesday 11/5 – Thursday 11/7** : BB Quizzes due. Both chapters 11-12, Political Parties and Interest Groups, *By the People*. Both can be taken by Thursday 11/7.

## 10 Congress

Readings announced in a prior class. Optional: “Without ‘Super PAC’ Numbers, Campaign Filings Present an Incomplete Picture” A story on the role of big money in the 2010 elections. Mayer, Jane. 2010. “Covert Operations” [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa\\_fact\\_mayer](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa_fact_mayer)

**Tuesday 11/12** : BB Quiz due. Chapter 13, Congress, *By the People*. Reading questions announced in class.

**Thursday 11/14** : Read Chapter, "Institutional Decline", <http://nb.mit.edu/f/8052>.

And look at this online ‘puzzle’ on Gerrymandered congressional districts: [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/map\\_of\\_the\\_week/2013/08/gerrymandering\\_jigsaw\\_puzzle\\_game\\_put\\_the\\_congressional\\_districts\\_back\\_together.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/map_of_the_week/2013/08/gerrymandering_jigsaw_puzzle_game_put_the_congressional_districts_back_together.html)

Optional reading: Packer, George. August 9, 2010. “The Empty Chamber”. *The New Yorker*. [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/09/100809fa\\_fact\\_packer](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/09/100809fa_fact_packer) .

## 11 The Presidency and The Bureaucracy

*Learning objectives announced in class.*

**Tuesday 11/19 :**

**Thursday 11/21 :** BB Quizzes due. Both chapters 14-15, The Presidency and The Bureaucracy, *By the People*. Both can be taken by Thursday 11/21.

Read book Chapter, "The Spider's Web: How Government Lawbreakers Routinely Elude the Law" <http://nb.mit.edu/f/8046> . Reading Questions announced in class.

## 12 The Judicial Branch

*Learning Objectives Describe the role of ideology and judicial philosophies in judicial decision making. Explain the origins of judicial review, briefly outlining major principles at stake in Marbury vs. Madison. Name at least five current members of the U.S. Supreme Court. Even better, name all nine. Identify some of the criticisms of the federal courts and some of the checks on the power of the courts. Explain how the Courts affect policymaking through 'doctrine'. Describe the process of appointment of judges to the federal courts.*

**Tuesday 11/26 :** BB quiz due. Chapter 16, The Judicial Branch, *By the People*

Souter, David. 2010. Commencement address, Harvard College. <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/05/text-of-justice-david-souters-speech/>

Scalia, Antonin. 2005. Constitutional Interpretation the Old-Fashioned Way. Address to Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington D.C. [http://www.cfif.org/htdocs/freedomline/current/guest\\_commentary/scalia-constitutional-speech.htm](http://www.cfif.org/htdocs/freedomline/current/guest_commentary/scalia-constitutional-speech.htm).

Reading questions announced in class.

**Thursday 11/28 :** No class scheduled, Thanksgiving holiday

## 13 Public Policymaking

**Tuesday 12/3 :** BB quiz due. Pick either Chapter 17 or 18, *By the People*. Both can be taken for extra credit.

**Thursday 12/5 :** No reading assigned. Course reflection.

### Final Exam

**When** The final exam will occur in class, during the scheduled time set by the university. *You are responsible for verifying the time of the final examination with the Registrar's calendar.*