

# American Government (PLS 102-06) Fall 2017

**Instructor:** H. Whitt Kilburn, Ph.D.

**Prerequisites:** None

**Email:** kilburnw@mail.gvsu.edu. Email may take up to 24 hours for me to respond.

**Class Time, Dates, and Location:** Monday and Wednesday, Lake Ontario Hall 174, 1-1:50pm. Friday online class is asynchronous, meaning that while we will not meet online all together at the same hour, you will have weekly deadlines for the online component.

**Office and Hours:** I hold 'virtual' hours anytime when logged on to Gmail mail.gvsu.edu chat. Periodically, I will hold virtual hours through the GVSU Google hangouts system. My in person hours are prior to our class, Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday 11-1pm, in the Dept. of Political Science, office ASH 1102.

**Course Website:** <http://bb.gvsu.edu>. Also see the companion site for our main textbook, <https://edge.sagepub.com/kernel17e>. There are many good study resources there.

**Course Objectives:** The course is a three credit, broad introduction to the major themes in contemporary United States (U.S.) government and politics. We will study how governing institutions work, how these institutions affect the behavior of American citizens and officials, and how people shape institutions to achieve political goals. The overall course objective is to provide you with a foundation of knowledge to critically appraise governance and the exercise of political power. We will build this foundation through the attainment of three goals: comprehending how political and governing institutions function in the United States of America's constitutional system; applying theories of politics and governance to current issues, and interpreting evidence from national statistical indicators and tables.

American Government is part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Foundation of the GVSU General Education (GE) program. Our work throughout the course will emphasize the attainment of two GE skills goals: 1. "Critical and creative thinking", which uses systematic reasoning to examine and evaluate ideas, leading to new ways of thinking or doing. In our class, you will assess differing perspectives and assumptions; evaluate evidence and the logic of arguments; and formulate novel approaches or create alternative interpretations. 2. "Ethical reasoning", which is a decision making process based on defining systems of value. In our class, you will recognize ethical issues when presented in a complex situation; demonstrate their understanding of key concepts and principles underlying various systems of reasoning; participate in activities that engage them in ethical reasoning; and demonstrate the ability to deal constructively with ambiguity and disagreement.

## Required Course Texts available at the GVSU bookstore:

Kernell, S., G. Jacobson, T. Kousser, and L. Vavreck. 2015. *The Logic of American Politics*. 7th Edition. New York: Sage Publications. *Logic of American Politics* is a comprehensive American government textbook. The 7th edition was ordered from the bookstore. You can purchase the 7th or 8th. Either is acceptable.

Putnam, R. 2015. *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. New York: Simon and Schuster. Putnam studies what we commonly call the 'American dream', the belief that through hard work and equality of opportunity each successive generation of children can live better than their parents. His conclusions are fairly bleak; for many American children, the American dream is largely out of reach. As a political scientist, Putnam examines how many factors, including government policy, have affected a growing opportunity gap in the lives of today's children, who live in increasingly segregated communities of rich and poor. Many of the policy issues examined in the book were issues raised during the 2016 elections to the U.S. Congress and the presidency.

**E-reserve/ Supplemental reading** In addition to the two core texts above, additional reading materials are posted in Course Documents on Blackboard. To read these materials, you'll need to know how to open PDF and .epub documents, the latter being a specific e-reader file format. These reading assignments are as essential to the course as any of the other materials.

You will be expected to keep up with current events by reading and posting news media articles and videos related to class subjects. Each week I will post a few articles I think are interesting, while for the second half of the course you will contribute current events reading for the class.

## **Our Monday – Wednesday – Online schedule**

**Regular online class component** Our Friday class session is scheduled as online. Beyond completing various assignments for the online component, you will have the responsibility of being an active participant in a discussion board. This discussion board component of the online class occurs each Friday throughout the semester.

Each week you will have the responsibility of 1) typing a response to one of the news media articles I post. A 'response' is a meaningful reflection on the meaning of the events described in the article and how those events relate to themes or ideas discussed in the course. And 2) two responses — two separate responses — to your peers' responses. In addition, you will be expected to provide one edit each week to a class "wiki", which will be used to synthesize class learning material. An edit is a meaningful contribution, through editing or original writing of summaries of class notes and ideas.

Your contributions must be posted according to the following deadlines:

1. My media posts are available on the discussion board by Wednesday at 11:59 each week.
2. Your response to my media posts are due by Friday, 11:59pm. Your responses to your peers' posts are due by Sunday, 11:59pm.
3. Wiki edits must be posted by Friday, 11:59pm.

**Quizzes:** There may be quizzes held in-class on course concepts. These quizzes will (usually) not be announced ahead of time, but will be somewhat predictable given the rules of a collective action 'game' we will play throughout the semester. According to the rules of the game, 'defections' on your part will result in a quiz held the following class day. These quizzes can not be made up due to absences. It will be fun!

**Reading or Film Questions:** For days in which you are assigned supplementary reading (assignments apart from the textbook) or asked to watch a film, you will be expected to complete a series of reading questions or summaries on each assignment. Responses must be typed for full credit and are due by the beginning of each class period for which the questions are assigned. Questions are graded on a 'check' system, from 'check plus' (95% credit) to 'check' (85% credit) to 'check minus' (75%) to 'minus' (50% points) or 0%. Late responses receive a maximum of 75%.

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

**Research Paper** You will be expected to write an approximately seven page (minimum, double-spaced) paper, plus a works cited page, on a topic related to Putnam's book. I will provide you with potential topics.

**Book review** As extra credit, you will have the opportunity to write a book review on one additional book, either *On Political Equality* or *How Democratic is America's Constitution?* by Robert Dahl. A link to these e-books are within Blackboard Course Documents. The book review will be approximately three double-spaced pages.

**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. 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 to a job interview, or even get sick and stay in bed. 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.

## **Assignments and Grading**

Course grades will be awarded according to the following proportions:

Midsemester Exam 1 17%

Midsemester Exam 2 17%

Research Paper: 22%

Final Exam: 22 %

Homework, Reading Questions, and Other Assignments, averaged together: 22%

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	

## General Expectations

A few key things you should know about my expectations of you:

1. If you are in class, please be *be in class* rather than absorbed in Internet cat videos. Put away your phone and laptop.
2. There is no automatic deduction for absences, but any absence risks credit for in-class work. So please arrive to class on time and actively participate. The class suffers when any student routinely skips class or is apathetic.
3. Assignments are *never* accepted through email. Use Blackboard as instructed or turn in a hard copy as directed.
4. If you believe you will have trouble with the course, or have difficulty completing the assignments, call an academic counselor at the Advising Resources and Special Programs Unit, 331-3588.

## SCHEDULE

The schedule outlined in the syllabus is tentative. Reading assignments are *due* by the date to the left of each set of assignments. Assignments may be changed during the semester. The learning objectives are the minimal learning requirements for each class. The objectives will be amended throughout the semester.

### 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.*

**Aug 28** : Course introduction, discussion.

**Aug 30** : Read Chapter 1 of *Logic of American Politics*.

**Sept 1 Asynchronous online** : Post an introduction of yourself to the class. Your introduction could be any multimedia format — a PowerPoint or Google Slides document, a brief web video, or really anything that 1) introduces you by name, 2) explains your (current) interests at GVSU, and 3) something else that we wouldn't know about you unless you told us — this assignment is *in addition to* a film response: Watch *Vaccine War*. Click "Watch the Full Program Online" <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/vaccines>. You should watch the documentary film. Questions to turn in for credit:

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. Does the existence of scientific evidence about the importance of widespread vaccinations mean that there should be *no* political debate over whether children should be vaccinated? Why or why not?
3. 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? Does it make a difference whether a parent's values are rooted in their religious beliefs?
4. Based on the facts presented in the film and ideas discussed in class, should vaccinations be required with exceptions only for pre-existing health conditions of the child to be vaccinated? If not, how should the health of the public be safeguarded?

(Your response to all questions as a whole should be approximately 3-4 paragraphs.)  
*Due:Friday, 11:59pm. posted to the link to Blackboard.*

## 2 The Constitution

**Learning Objectives** *Identify the parts of the U.S. Constitution (including amendments) describing the structure and powers of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Explain how the Constitution has been 'democratized'. Identify parts of the Constitution 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.

**Sept 4** : Labor Day holiday

**Sept 6** : Read Chapter 2, *Logic of American Politics*. Please be sure to bring your textbook with you to class, as we will refer back to the U.S. Constitution printed in the book. Read *The Federalist* #10. It is printed at the end of your textbook.

Reading Questions for *The Federalist* #10 :

1. In your own words — not Madison's — what are factions? What would you consider a contemporary example of a 'faction, and why?
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? How or how not?

**Sept 8 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

### 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.

**Sept 11** : Read Chapter 3, *Federalism, Logic of American Politics*

**Sept 13** : Read the opinions in U.S. Supreme Court case *Gonzales v. Raich* (2005); posted at Blackboard. 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 it not an unconstitutional exercise of the federal government's power to shut down California's medical marijuana program?
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. Why, in your own opinion, is this case controversial and important? What controversial governing principles are at stake in the decision?

**Sept 15 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

## 4 Civil Rights

**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 liberties controversies involving people, both U.S. citizens and foreign nationals, detained as prisoners of war or enemy combatants as part of the ‘war on terror’. 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 treating people differently on the basis of sexual orientation. Explain the origin of affirmative action, and cite principles that have guided the Supreme Court’s treatment of affirmative action in recent years.*

**Sept 18** : Read Chapter 4, *Logic of American Politics*

**Sept 20** : Read Zink, J. R. (December 2013). James Wilson versus the Bill of Rights: Progress, Popular Sovereignty, and the Idea of the U.S. Constitution. *Political Research Quarterly*. 67(2). 253-264. Article on Blackboard.

1. What were James Wilson’s contributions to American politics?
2. What are James Wilson’s arguments against the Bill of Rights? Were they warranted? Are these arguments persuasive? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe that the Bill of Rights has discouraged individuals from exerting their sovereign power? Why or why not? Answer by citing ideas from the textbook and class discussions, as well as the Zink article.

**Sept 22 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

## 5 Civil Liberties

**Sept 25** : Read Chapter 5, *Logic of American Politics*

**Sept 27** : Read short excerpts from U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Morse v. Frederick*, at Blackboard. Reading Questions:

1. Why, according to the principal, should the student's sign be confiscated and Frederick suspended from school. In other words, why does the principal think her punishment of Frederick was acceptable?
2. Why, however, does Frederick believe that his 1st amendment rights were violated? In your own opinion, is Frederick's speech sufficiently 'political' to merit 1st Amendment protection?
3. In your own opinion, should school districts be allowed to censor student speech when the speech promotes illegal drug use? Or any other issues, such as...illegal skateboarding or smoking? Or in other words, should principals be allowed to censor any speech a principal believes may harm students' learning environments?

**Sept 29 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

## 6 Midsemester Exam 1 and first discussion of *Our Kids*

**Learning Objectives** Announced via Blackboard for *Our Kids* book.

**Oct 2** : *Midsemester Examination 1 in class*

**Oct 4** : Chapters of *Our Kids* assigned via Blackboard. Reading questions assigned via Blackboard.

**Oct 6 Asynchronous online** : Chapters of *Our Kids* assigned via Blackboard. Discussion board topics will focus on current events related to *Our Kids*.

## 7 continuing discussion of *Our Kids*

**Oct 9-11** : Chapters of *Our Kids* assigned via Blackboard along with reading questions.

**Oct 13 Asynchronous online** : Chapters of *Our Kids* assigned via Blackboard. Discussion board topics will focus on current events related to *Our Kids*.

## 8 Congress

*Learning Objectives announced on Blackboard.*

**Oct 16** : Read Chapter 6, *Logic of American Politics*



**Oct 18** : Read excerpts from *The Broken Branch*, at Blackboard.

1. What characteristics of Congress were demonstrated with the bankruptcy bill — and the Medicare vote?
2. How does the behavior of Congress persons demonstrate the decline of "institutional identity"? And how does this development relate to the idea of 'checks and balances'?
3. How has 'regular order' changed in Congress? And what is it?
4. In class we discussed four general organizing principles of Congress. How do the developments described in *The Broken Branch* describe ways in which these principles have been compromised or harmed?

**Oct 20 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

Optional: Take a look at this incredible graphic on partisan polarization and representation in the U.S. Congress, at <http://xkcd.com/1127/large/>.

## 9 The Presidency and Bureaucratic Policymaking

*Learning Objectives announced on Blackboard.*

**Oct 23** : Read Chapters 7-8, *Logic of American Politics*

**Oct 25** : Linz, J. 1990. "The Perils of Presidentialism". *Journal of Democracy* posted at Blackboard. Linz' essay, published over thirty years ago, explains why presidential governing systems (such as ours), encounter severe crises of legitimacy, where the public's trust in government declines to the point where it can not function. Or in a recent news media article published as a reflection on Linz' work, [http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2013/10/juan\\_linz\\_dies\\_yale\\_political\\_scientist\\_explains\\_why\\_government\\_by\\_crisis.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2013/10/juan_linz_dies_yale_political_scientist_explains_why_government_by_crisis.html). "Juan Linz's Bad News for America...His lifes work tells us that American democracy is doomed."

1. As characterized by Linz, what are the defining differences between parliamentary and presidential systems? From Linz' perspective, how typical is the USA of presidential systems? –How 'presidential', in Linz' terms, are the governing institutions of the USA?
2. What is the 'zero sum game', and why is it problematic in presidential systems?
3. Why, according to Linz, do constitutional factors (rather than economic or cultural ones) explain why democracies decline into dictatorships?

Optional: <https://xkcd.com/1122/>

**Oct 27 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

*Paper on Putnam book due by Friday, October 27, 11:59pm, posted to Blackboard.*

## 10 The Judiciary

**Learning Objectives** *Contrast two major theories of constitutional interpretation identified in supplementary reading assignments. Describe the role of ideology and judicial philosophies in judicial decision making, particularly interpretation of the Constitution. Explain the origins of judicial review, describing 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.*

**Oct 30** : Read Chapter 9, *Logic of American Politics*

**Nov 1** : Read Souter, David. 2010. "Commencement address", Harvard College, posted at Blackboard. and read Scalia, Antonin. 2005. "Constitutional Interpretation the Old-Fashioned Way." Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington D.C., posted at Blackboard. Reading questions due:

David Souter is retired Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, serving from 1990 to 2009. Antonin Scalia was an Associate Justice from 1986 until his death in 2016. Both were appointed by Republican presidents. Please post responses to the following.

1. First read both Scalia and Souters remarks on Constitutional interpretation. What is the basic theory of original intent ? (Souter refers to this theory as the 'fair reading' model.) As a way of determining what the Constitution does and does not say, what are the advantages of the theory?
2. Why would the theory have developed in response to the Supreme Court's decision in Roe v. Wade?
3. From Souter's perspective, why is the 'fair reading' model unrealistic?
4. Why, according to Souter, is it the job of Justices on the court to give "meaning" to facts?

**Nov 3 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

## 11 Public Opinion, Voting, and Elections

**Learning Objectives** Describe the 4-part explanation for why presidential approval changes over the course of a President's term in office. 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.

**Nov 6** : Read Chapters 10 and 11, *Logic of American Politics*.

**Nov 8** : Menand, L. 2004. "The Unpolitical Animal: How Political Science Understands Voters". *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2004. At Blackboard.

Reading Questions:

1. What are the major theories Menand identifies for explaining how voters form opinions about politics? In your answer, identify at least one key idea from each theory. And for each theory, provide an explanation of it based on its application to the 2014 mid-term elections.
2. Which theory does Menand describe as a better theory (meaning, perhaps most consistent with empirical evidence) for understanding how Americans are capable of making informed choices?
3. Overall, given the different perspectives reviewed by Menand, would you agree or disagree with the statement that "Americans are ill equipped to make informed, 'rational' judgments about American politics, particularly candidates and parties." Why or why not?

**Nov 10 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

## 12 review, Midsemester Exam 2

**Nov 13** : review day

**Nov 15** : *Midsemester Examination 2 in class*.

**Nov 17 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

## 13 Political Parties and Interest Groups

**Learning Objectives for parties and interest groups** *Explain why the United States is a 2-party system. Contrast accountability and representation, the functions of political parties and why in some respects American political parties are 'weak' or 'strong'. Explain the theory of the median voter and why two-party (or candidate) races tend to produce centrist tendencies in party platforms. Contrast proportional representation with an informed opinion on the desirability of promoting a third-party in American politics. Contrast interest groups with political parties. Explain the difference between economic and non-economic*

*groups, and why one type is usually more successful at overcoming collective action problems. Explain pluralism, criticisms of it, and the evidence on the extent to which interest groups prevail over public opinion in public policy. Define a PAC in election campaigns, contrast it with the development of less regulated, 'shadow' groups.*

**Nov 20** : Read Chapters 12-13, *Logic of American Politics*

*Optional book review due by Nov 21, 11:59pm, posted to Blackboard. — Book review is extra credit*

**Nov 22-24** : Thanksgiving holiday

## **14 The News Media**

*Learning Objectives announced on Blackboard.*

**Nov 27** : Read Chapter 14, *Logic of American Politics*

**Nov 29** : Read Kiener, R. (May 2013). "Media Bias". *CQ Researcher*, 23(17). 401-424. posted at Blackboard. Reading Questions announced on Blackboard.

**Dec 1 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

## **15 (summing up )**

**Dec 4 – Dec 6** : Read Chapter 15, *Logic of American Politics*

**Dec 8 Asynchronous online** : follow online assignment guidelines.

## **Cumulative Final Examination**

**Tuesday, December 12 2:00 pm - 3:50 pm** Lake Ontario Hall 174. Exam will be planned for a duration of 75 minutes. Bring a pencil or pen; I will provide paper.