

## **POLS 1005-- Guns, Money, Politics: Introduction to American Government**

Fall 2019

Professor Law

Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday 2:15-3:45pm, and by appointment in James Hall  
3407

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This course is intended to provide a basic introduction to the American political system by focusing on its institutions and processes. Unlike a history course where events are usually taught in chronological sequence, we will focus our study on the major institutions of American government and politics: Congress, the Presidency, and the federal courts as well as closely related institutions such as interest groups and the media.

A broad theme that will provide the backdrop for our study of American politics is the politics of gun control. Some of the big questions we will tackle along the way include: Why are guns and gun violence so widespread in American society and culture? Why, after each mass shooting, is there an outpouring of grief, yet no meaningful legislative reform? Why does no other industrialized democratic nation have the problem of mass shootings? Americans generally support measures to restrict guns, but why has that public support not translated into laws restricting guns? Who is the NRA and why are they so powerful?

We begin by exploring some of the ideas that underlie and continue to shape our system of government by looking at the founding debates between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. The ideas they were arguing over can now be traced to our Constitution. More interestingly, many of these propositions are not settled and continue to be debated today, for example the concept of federalism (the proper division of power between the federal and state governments) continues to be a point of contention between liberals and conservatives thereby exacerbating political conflicts.

The course also looks at the historical development of the three branches of government. Students will gain a working knowledge of how the government system functions by learning *how* the different institutions operate and interact. Likewise, we will analyze the historical relationship between the three branches of government.

By the end of this course you should have a good understanding of the key debates within American politics as well as an understanding of how its political institutions work. Given the theme of guns in the course, you will also have a deepened understanding of why no other developed nation has the same level of gun violence as the United States and why our country, despite suffering repeated and ongoing mass shootings, seems unable or unwilling to make the legislative changes that other developed nations have made to prevent these preventable mass shootings.

Ultimately the larger goals of this course are (hopefully) to spark an interest in American politics and for you to leave the class as a more politically savvy and engaged citizen.

## REQUIRED READINGS

The 2 required books for this class are:

-Christine Barbour and Gerald C. Wright, *Keeping the Republic: Power and Citizenship in American Politics* (7th Brief Edition) Congressional Quarterly Press, and  
-Jennifer Carlson's *Citizen Protector: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

A copy of each book is on reserve at the library.

There are addition **required** readings for each week that you will find on Blackboard. These articles are required readings and they will appear on the exams. It is easier to understand American government and politics if we talk about concrete examples from the news rather than just read about abstract concepts in the textbook and that is what those supplemental readings are.

There will be two in-class exams. You will also be required to write draft and then a 5-page paper. I will take attendance at every class meeting.

Attendance/Participation		<b>15%</b>
Midterm exam	<b>Oct. 23</b>	<b>20%</b>
Outline/draft of paper	<b>Nov. 4</b>	<b>15%</b>
5 page paper	<b>Nov. 18</b>	<b>25%</b>
Final exam	<b>Dec. 18, 1-3pm</b>	<b>25%</b>

### **Grading criteria:**

100-94 A, 93-90 A-, 89-87 B+, 86-83 B, 82-80 B-, 79-77 C+, 76-73 C, 72-70 C-, 69-67 D+, 66-63 D, 62-60 D- 59, and below F.

## ADMISTRATIVE POLICIES

1) There will be no make-up exams for unexcused absences. Excused absences for an exam or a missed assignment requires verifiable documentation. If you miss an exam or assignment and have a legitimate reason for doing so, it remains your responsibility to contact me as soon as possible.

2) The due dates of assignments and attendance for exams with respect to religious holidays is governed by NY state law and those policies can be found here:  
<http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/about/initiatives/policies/nondiscrimination.php>

2) The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for implementing that policy can be found at this site: <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/policies>. If a faculty member suspects

a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits the violation, the faculty member MUST report the violation.

3) If you are having difficulty in the class, come see me at my office hours or make an appointment at the earliest sign of difficulty, not toward the end of the semester. If you are not pleased with your performance on an assignment or unclear about the readings, come see me as soon as possible so that we can talk about some study skills and test taking strategies. I can't do much to help you if you come see me only at the end of the term.

4) In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at 718-951- 5538. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services please provide your professor with the course accommodation form and discuss your specific accommodation with him/her.

5) Every calendar day that a written assignment is late results in a one whole grade deduction unless previous arrangements with the professor have been made.

## SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

### **Week One: Introduction**

What is "politics"? Where do we find "politics"? Focus especially on Articles I, II, III of the Constitution. Which is the longest/shortest? Read also the Bill of Rights. If one of the objectives of the Leviathan/government is to keep us safe, why does the government allow the proliferation of guns in U.S. society? What is unique about America's gun problem?

Readings: The course syllabus, U.S. Constitution, and memorize the text of the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen Protectors*, Chapter 1.

### **Week Two: The Founding**

Who are the Federalists and Anti-Federalists? What were they most concerned about and why were their views in conflict with each other? What does the text of the Second Amendment actually say? Are all the words of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment clear? What counts as an "arm"? Bazoorkas? AR-15s? Muskets? Who was part of the "militia" in Revolutionary times?

Reading: Federalist Papers numbers 10 and 51 (both these essays easily findable with a simple Google search of "Federalist 10" and "Federalist 51"), Carlson, Chapter 2, Barbour and Wright Chapter 2, the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and Thomas Fleming "Militia and Continentals" *Journal of American Revolution*.  
<http://allthingsliberty.com/2013/12/militia-continentals/> and Justice John Paul Stevens, "The five extra words that can fix the Second Amendment", *The Washington Post*,  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-five-extra-words-that-can-fix-the-second-amendment/2014/04/11/f8a19578-b8fa-11e3-96ae-f2c36d2b1245\\_story.html?postshare=4311449536975223&tid=ss\\_fb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-five-extra-words-that-can-fix-the-second-amendment/2014/04/11/f8a19578-b8fa-11e3-96ae-f2c36d2b1245_story.html?postshare=4311449536975223&tid=ss_fb)

### **Week Three: Political Culture and Ideology**

What are the basic ideas that form the foundations of our political culture? How is political culture different from ideology? What is the American Dream? How can the American Dream be considered ideology? How would you explain America's gun culture to a foreigner? Does owning guns define who is American? Are mass shootings caused by mental health or video games?

Reading: Barbour and Wright Text Chapter 1, Carlson Chapter 3, and Blackboard article by Max Fisher "What makes America's gun culture unique in four charts" *The Washington Post* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2012/12/15/what-makes-americas-gun-culture-totally-unique-in-the-world-as-demonstrated-in-four-charts/> and William Wan and Lindsey Bayer, *The Washington Post*, "Are video games and mental illness causing mass shootings? No, research shows" <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2019/08/05/is-mental-illness-causing-americas-mass-shootings-no-research-shows/>

### **Week Four: Federalism**

Why do we have a federal system of government? What were the points of contention between the Federalists and Antifederalist over the federal system? How were these debates reflected in the writing and design of the Constitution? Has the debate been settled? Does having a federal system make it harder or easier for the US to pass gun control legislation?

Reading: Barbour and Wright Chapter 3, Carlson Chapter 4, and Blackboard articles by Jeff Glor, "Gun control advocates take on patchwork of state gun laws" CBS News.com <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/gun-control-advocates-take-on-patchwork-of-state-laws/>, "Gun laws in the US: 7 things you need to know about the data" *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-news-blog/2013/jan/16/gun-laws-need-to-know>

### **Week Five: The Legislative Branch**

What is the difference between direct versus representative democracy? Do we need term limits in Congress? How does the NRA exert control over Members of Congress? Why do some Members of Congress feel "safe" in their districts?

Reading: Barbour and Wright text Chapter 6, Carlson Chapter 5, and Blackboard article by Christopher Ingram "Gerrymandering: How to steal an election", *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/03/01/this-is-the-best-explanation-of-gerrymandering-you-will-ever-see/>, and Robert Draper, *The New York Times*, "Inside the Power of the NRA" <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/15/magazine/inside-the-power-of-the-nra.html>

### **Week Six: Elections and Public Opinion**

Why don't people vote? If they vote, how do they vote? Why do we have only two strong political parties in the United States when other countries have many active parties? What is the role of parties in our democracy? What does a two-party system mean for minority groups in electoral politics? How does money affect campaigns and elections? Despite public support for sensible gun control, why doesn't it translate into legislation?

Readings: Barbour and Wright Text Chapters 10 and 12, and Barry, McGinty, Wernick and Webster, “After Newton—Public Opinion on Gun Policy and Mental Illness” *The New England Journal of Medicine*. February 3, 2013  
<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1300512>

### **Week Seven: Political Parties and Interest Groups**

Is a political party the same thing as the “faction Hamilton was so afraid of in Federalists 10 and 51? What is the function of a political party? Are they the same thing as an interest group? Is the NRA a “faction”? How do interest groups affect politics? Why are some groups more likely than others to organize to pursue their interests? How does the NRA differ from the AARP?

Readings: Barbour and Wright Text Chapter 11, Carlson Chapter 6, and James Surowiecki, October 19, 2015, “Taking On the NRA” *The New Republic*  
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/19/taking-on-the-n-r-a>, and Tom Watkins, “How the NRA Wields its Influence” <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/09/us/nra-gun-research/>

### **Week Eight: The Executive Branch**

What is the “imperial presidency?” Where do presidential powers derive from? Has presidential power increased, decreased, or stayed the same over time? If you feel that they have increased, is this a good thing? What is the legacy of the Watergate scandal? What qualities do Americans look for in a president? What can the President do on gun control if Congress is unwilling or unable to act?

Reading: Barbour and Wright Text Chapter 7, Carlson Chapter 7, and watch Obama’s speech after the Oregon shooting, October 1, 2015, *Time*,  
<http://time.com/4058961/oregon-shooting-president-obama-transcript-speech/>  
You should be prepared to discuss the Jennifer Carlson book.

### **Week Nine: The Judicial Branch**

Why did Madison (in the Federalist Papers) believe that the judiciary would be “the least dangerous branch?” Why do we allow nine un-elected persons to make decisions that can overturn laws and orders of the Congress and President? Isn’t this kind of power undemocratic? Why did the framers of the Constitution design the judiciary to be insulated from electoral politics? Based on what rationale did the Court rule that we have right to a gun in *District of Columbia v Heller (2009)*?

Readings: *Federalist Papers* Number 78, Barbour and Wright Chapter 9, and Lyle Denniston, “A Constitutional Right to a Gun” SCOTUSblog.com ,  
<http://www.scotusblog.com/2008/06/court-a-constitutional-right-to-a-gun/>

### **Week Ten: The Bureaucracy**

How much control does a President have over the governmental bureaucracy? What are the

sources of bureaucratic authority? What is the ATF, it's original mission, and it's current mission? What does ATF spend most of its resources on?

Reading: Barbour and Wright Text Chapter 8, and Sarah Zhang, "Why gun violence can't be treated as a public health issue" *The Atlantic*,  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/02/gun-violence-public-health/553430/>

### **Week Eleven: Civil Liberties**

What is the difference between civil liberties and civil rights? Why should we care if criminals have rights?

Reading: Barbour and Wright Chapter 4, and Eric Posner, "The Republican-Democratic Divide over Civil Liberties", *Slate*, Dec, 7, 2015.  
[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/view\\_from\\_chicago/2015/12/the\\_difficulties\\_with\\_denying\\_guns\\_to\\_those\\_on\\_the\\_no\\_fly\\_list.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/view_from_chicago/2015/12/the_difficulties_with_denying_guns_to_those_on_the_no_fly_list.html)

### **Week Twelve: Civil Rights**

Why are we still talking about Civil Rights for African Americans and other minorities centuries after slavery and decades after the Civil Rights movement? How effective was the Supreme Court alone in attempting to desegregate schools and public accommodations in the South. What is Cobb's goal in telling the story of the use of guns by African Americans to defend themselves change your view of the Civil Rights struggle? Why do guns, inanimate objects, have an amendment in the Constitution protecting them, but women do not?

Readings Barbour and Wright Chapter 5, and Carl T Bogus, "Was slavery a factor in the Second Amendment?" *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/opinion/second-amendment-slavery-james-madison.html>; NPR Podcast: Tell me More, <http://www.npr.org/2014/06/05/319072156/guns-kept-people-alive-during-the-civil-rights-movement>

### **Week Thirteen: The Media**

Is the media biased? What is the nature of that bias? How does "new media" affect politics? Does media coverage of politics stimulate interest and educate citizens or does it just turn people off to politics? How has the role of the media changed in politics over time? Does media coverage of mass shootings just encourage more shooters and stereotype perpetrators? How can the media ethically cover shootings?

Readings: Barbour and Wright Chapter 13 and *The New York Times*, "How should the media cover mass shooters?" October 9, 2015. Room for Debate, "How should the media cover mass shooters?" *The New York Times*,  
<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/10/09/how-should-the-news-media-cover-mass-shooters>