

SEMESTER IN WASHINGTON

At

Georgetown University

scs.georgetown.edu/washington

American Government Seminar:

American Democracy – Visions and Reality

Objectives

This course interrogates aspects of the past, present, and future of democracy in the United States. We begin with an exploration of the emergence of the current political environment. We then explore a number of analytic frameworks for understanding the nature of American politics. In the last part of the course, we consider substantive issues and debates concerning American politics, including debates about public policy and institutional structure.

The course aims to leverage the advantages afforded to us by our presence in the nation's capital by seeking to synthesize experiential and academic material.

Requirements

Students are expected to enter the class with a solid understanding of the basics of American politics. Typically, this is the level of understanding that would result from taking college level courses on American politics and from following current events in a serious outlet such as the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, or the *Economist*.

Students are expected to complete all required readings and to come prepared to discuss and debate their contents. The class itself will consist of a mixture of lectures, class discussions, and occasional field trips.

Grades

Students' grades will depend upon three elements: class participations (20%), an in-class midterm (35%) and a final (55%). Both exams will consist of synthetic essays.

Possible Readings

Readings are subject to the instructor's discretion, but might include such books as Michael Barone. *Our Country*. Robert A. Caro. 2003. *Master of the Senate: The Years of LBJ*, Vol. III. Rick Perlstein. *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*; Rick Perlstein. *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*; Sean Wilentz. *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*; Ken Shepsle and Mark Bonchek. *Analyzing Politics*; Work on racial and gender identity – Jeremy Mayer's for example. Brad Bradley Smith. *Unfree Speech: The Folly of Campaign Finance Reform*. Readings would also include articles on current events from high quality outlets such as *National Journal*,

Congressional Quarterly Weekly Review and could include briefing papers from interest groups, such as those from FairVote.

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Course Outline

I. Modern political history

Sessions covering political developments in 1960s (civil rights movement, women's movement, Great Society, Vietnam War), 1970s (stagflation, Watergate), 1980s (rise of Reagan, rise of religious right), 1990 (Clinton, Republican Revolution, reinventing government), 2000s (Bush, war in Iraq)

These would focus in particular on political processes in Washington and how the Executive Branch, members of Congress and the Supreme Court responded to (and/or created) social changes.

II. Analytic Frameworks

Sessions revisiting modern American politics from various theoretical perspectives: rational choice, libertarian, power-theory, identity politics and institutional theories of politics.

III. Debates

Sessions in which students would assess questions in American politics in light of historical context and various analytical frameworks. Questions would include institutional structure – how should encourage participation? Should we have proportional representation? Campaign finance reform? How can we make members of Congress more responsive? More responsible? Questions could also include policy questions – should the government do more to aid the economy? How could education be reformed?