

COLBY COLLEGE
Government 111: Introduction to American Government and Politics

Instructor, Carrie LeVan
Fall 2025
T/H: 1:00 –2:15
Room: Diamond 122

Email: calevan@colby.edu
Student Hours: T/H 11:00 to 12:00
W 11:00 to 12:00
And, by Appointment
Office: Diamond 267

“A primary object should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty more pressing than communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country?”

~ George Washington

Course Description

This course is designed to provide an introduction to both American political institutions and political behavior. Throughout this class, we will examine the following topics: constitutional theory, the constitutional system, political culture, political institutions (the presidency, congress, the judicial branch), political participation (elections, voting, mobilization and political parties), elections, campaigns, public opinion, and mass media.

Course Learning Outcomes/Goals

There are two types of Learning goals in this class. The first is “Substantive,” which describe the content I hope you learn by the end of this class. The second is “Skill-Development,” which describe the critical skills that I hope you develop or improve upon by the end of this class. They are as follows:

Substantive Outcomes:

1. To fully comprehend the basic functions and practices of the US Federal Government according to the US Constitution, with a special emphasis on the three branches: Executive, Legislative, and Judicial.
2. To identify contemporary theories of American Political Behavior, including: political participation, public opinion, vote choice, campaign strategy, media affects, race/ethnicity, political parties, and interest groups.
3. To identify and critique contemporary political behaviors of American Political Actors: candidates, politicians, bureaucrats, voters, and citizens.

Skill-Development Outcomes:

1. To draw connections between course content and the world around us
2. To generate engaged and active citizens
3. To improve the clarity—Planning, Organization, Language Choice—of writing
4. To practice public speaking skills

Requirements

The course will have the following requirements:

Class Attendance and Participation: Each student is required to attend lecture. It is expected that each student will complete all assigned reading prior to lecture, so that he/she/they is prepared to participate during class. Your attendance and participation will be considered in your final grade.

Reading Reflections: As part of class participation points, each student is expected to complete a weekly reading reflection. Each week, I will post a new Discussion Forum to the Course Moodle under the Assignments Header. Read the question I post to the forum, complete the assigned reading for Thursday's class, then respond to the question in about 2-3 sentences. Note: Some of the assigned "readings" for Thursday are videos/interviews with authors. You should watch/listen to these first and then complete the reflection. **Reading Reflections should be completed before class on Thursdays.**

Current Events: In groups of 3-4, students will pick one week in which they will complete a *current events* handout and present to the class one major news story that is related to that week's course topic. In these groups, they should complete the handout and put together an 8-10 minute presentation of the current event and help to lead a class discussion on the event, drawing connections to that week's reading and lecture. Each individual group member is also required to write a personal reflection of the assignment.

Campus Talks Reflection: One major goal of this class is to help students become engaged citizens of both this campus and this country. In order to help facilitate this type of civic engagement, students are required to attend **two** separate on-campus talks and write a one-page (single-spaced) reflection of the attended talks. The talks should be related to government, politics, or public policy broadly defined. The reflection is due one week after the attended talk. Students should use the "Campus Talks Reflection" handout found on the Course Moodle page under the "Assignments" header. **At least one campus talk, must be completed before the midterm.**

There are many organizations on campus that bring important activists, scholars, politicians, and practitioners to campus. Here are some: Government Department, Sociology Department, Education Department, Environmental Studies Department, Women and Gender Studies Department, Goldfarb Center, The Oak Institute, etc. I will do my best to advertise appropriate talks in class, but encourage students to send me emails announcing speakers they believe would meet the criteria described above. I can then share those talks with the class.

After attending a talk, students should write a one-page, three-paragraph, single-spaced reflection of the event. The reflection should do the following: (1) summarize the talk, (2) make a connection to the course's content, (3) evaluate the talk (i.e. did the student agree/disagree with the speakers? Why or why not?).

Exams: There will be two exams given in this course: a midterm and a final. The midterm will be given in class during seventh week (October 16th). The final examination will be a take-home exam and will be distributed during exam week, exact date **TBD**. **NOTE:** Although it is a take-home exam, it is still timed and students should expect to be available to take the exam during our assigned exam window.

Course Paper: A description of the paper will be distributed during Week 7. Students will submit the paper in stages. They will first complete an outline, using the “Paper Outline Handout” found on the course website. Once completed, they should save the outline in .PDF format and then upload the outline to the Course Moodle under the “Assignments” header before class on Tuesday, November 10th. Students will then use the feedback I give them on their outline to complete their course paper. The final draft of the paper is due week 14 (Thursday, December 4th).

Grade Distribution

The weights of grades are as follows:

Participation	10%
Current Event	10%
Talk Reflections	15%
Paper Outline	10%
Course Paper	15%
Midterm	20%
Final Exam	20%

Grading Scale:

94-100 = A
90-93.9 = A-
87-89.9 = B+
84-86.9 = B
80-83.9 = B-
77-79.9 = C+
74-76.9 = C
70-73.9 = C-
67-69.9 = D+
64-66.9 = D
60-63.9 = D-
Below 60 = F

Required Texts

McClain, Paula D. and Steven C. Tauber. *American Government in Black and White: Diversity and Democracy, Sixth Edition*. 2023. (abbreviation in syllabus **B&W**)

Additional readings will be posted to the course website.

Student Hours/Office Hours

Student hours (a.k.a. Office Hours) are available on Tuesday and Thursday from 11:00 AM—12:00 PM and 2:30 – 3:30 PM. Students may also schedule a time to see me via email.

Student hours are an opportunity for you to discuss with me the following: (1) questions about course content and/or assignments, (2) conflicts with class schedule, (3) opportunities for internships, research, jobs, etc. (4) graduation requirements, (5) crazy stuff happening in the news, (6) problems with campus climate, (7) struggles with physical/mental illness, (8) learning norms around networking, (9) just to say, “What up”, (10) all of the above and anything in between.

In other words, you don’t need a reason to stop by and talk, just do it.

Late Work

Assignments should be handed in when they are due in order to avoid penalties. Most assignments should be uploaded through the Course Moodle on the day they are due. Students should not email copies of assignments to me, unless otherwise told. Any work handed in late receives a *penalty of one-third of one letter grade* for every day it is late (starting immediately after the work is due).

If you need an extension for any reason, both legitimate (illness, injury, family emergency, etc.) or illegitimate (mismanaged time, partied too hard over the weekend—doghead came to town—sports team was traveling—you know the schedule in advance and should plan accordingly—, family wedding—you know this in advance and should plan accordingly—,etc.), please come talk to me and we can try and make a plan. But know, that I schedule due dates to correspond with my other classes, so that I can return assignments in a timely manner. When you delay submission, you sabotage my schedule and my ability to grade and return assignments in a timely manner.

Academic Dishonesty

All work completed in this course is expected to be your own. If you are unfamiliar or have questions regarding the College's policy on academic dishonesty, see <https://www.colby.edu/academics/academic-integrity/>

A couple notes about Academic Dishonesty:

1. It is okay to use other people's ideas and/or words, just give them credit when you do. That is not cheating. Use proper citation to do this. You should do this for major assignments and on smaller assignments as well. You should do this in tweets, and Instagram posts too just by tagging/hyperlinking the original author or creator.
2. It's okay to work together with classmates on assignments, when a professor has explicitly given permission. When in doubt, ask. When a professor explicitly says you should work independently on an assignment, you should ALWAYS do the work alone.
3. If you are unsure whether you should cite something, ask. Transparency is always the best policy.
4. Lying to a professor is considered academic dishonesty.
5. People turn to cheating when they lack confidence or mismanage their time. Avoid both by using the resources provided at Colby: go to tutoring, the writing center, library office hours, professor office hours, TA office hours, create study groups, block out time in your schedule dedicated to completing assignments.
6. Ask for help, everyone else is and you should to. Asking for help is NOT cheating, it is how you are successful.

Policy on the Use of Generative AI (i.e., Chat GPT)

Generative AI is increasingly becoming a part of our day-to-day lives and it is a tool that can “potentially” help us master content and skills more efficiently. Not learning to use generative AI tools, like Chat GPT, is not an option; we must and we should.

In this course, you *may* use generative AI programs in particular stages of your work: preparatory—brainstorming, outlining, prewriting, idea generating—and proofing—editing, spell checking, grammar checking, creating works cited, etc. This, however, comes with some caveats and warnings:

1. Be aware that the use of these tools may also stifle your own independent and creative thinking by causing you to constrain your ideas to the ones the tool has produced and to not include your own unique lived experience, your own learning from across campus, this course’s specific content, and your discussions with classmates and peers.
2. Know that material produced by these tools tend to be inaccurate, incomplete, and/or problematic (racist, sexist, homophobic, antisemitic, etc.). You are responsible for the final product you present and will be graded based on what you have submitted.
3. These tools have a tendency to “hallucinate” references (present seemingly plausible sources/citations as real when they are not). Do NOT trust any references until you have cross-listed and read them.

Like any other source, you **MUST** disclose the use of generative AI and appropriately cite all use. For example, you must place in quotation marks any sentences or suggestions written by the tool. Failure to do so will be considered a violation of our academic integrity policy and will be reported as plagiarism. *If you are unsure whether you should cite, just ask me.* Transparency is the best policy. You are not breaking the rules by using generative AI; so, let me know when you are. Do not take credit for ideas that are not your own.

Last note: Generative AI is here forever; you must learn to use it. However, you *must* remain more creative, critical, analytical, inventive, intuitive than the model. Do not make yourself obsolete; be better than ChatGPT!¹

Students with Disabilities

Students with College documented disabilities should inform me as soon as possible, so that I can help meet their needs. If you receive exam accommodations (i.e. extra time), please be sure to reserve a space in the testing center at least **72 hours prior** to an exam through the **AIM portal**. You can find the portal using the link below and clicking on the “Using The Alternative Testing Center” button. Instructions for how to use the Alternative Testing Center can be found here: Instructions for how to use the Alternative Testing Center, if you receive accommodations, can be found here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KmJNjMwq2maKtmSPkNoR4_tzXySBxmS2/view

¹ Used language and ideas from [here](#) to construct this policy around generative AI

If you have question or concerns about your disability or suspect that you may qualify for services, you should use this link and follow the instructions for how to apply for services <https://life.colby.edu/get-support/access-disability-services/> or by calling at (207) 859-4000 or by emailing accommodations@colby.edu

Schedule of Course

PART I: CONSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND PRINCIPLES OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

- **Week 1—September 3-5: Introduction to Course and Why Government**
Thursday, September 4: Welcome
Reading: *B&W*, Chapter 1
(Online): “How Democracies Die” interview w/ Levitsky and Ziblatt— [Link](#)
- **Week 2— September 8-12: American Political Theory**
Tuesday, September 9: Collective Action

Thursday, September 11: Key Documents—The Constitution, Articles of Confederation and the Declaration of Independence
Reading: *B&W*, Chapter 2
Reading:
(ONLINE): Debate on the State of American Democracy Today—A Republic, if we Can Keep It [Link](#):
(ONLINE): Watch sample “Current Events Presentation” and “Description of the Assignment” (2 Videos)
- **Week 3— September 15-19: The Great Democratic Debate and Federalism**
Tuesday, September 16: Federalism
Reading: *B&W*, Chapter 3

Thursday, September 18: The Great Democratic Debate
Reading: (Online) Jamilia Michener Talk on *Fragmented Democracy: Medicaid Federalism and Unequal Politics*—Link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gye6y1U3GUI>

PART II: AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNMENT

- **Week 4— September 22- 26: Congress**
Tuesday, September 23: According to the Constitution
Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 6

Thursday, September 25: How to Represent?
Reading: (ONLINE): “The Case for Democratic Recklessness:” (.PDF) also on Moodle [Link](#)

- **Week 5—September 29- October 3: Presidency and Bureaucracy**

Tuesday, September 30: The President

Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 7

Thursday, October 2: Bureaucracy

Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 8

ONLINE: “If Trump Wins Could He Really Use the Justice Department to Jail His Rivals?” [Link](#)

- **Week 6— October 6- 10: Judiciary**

Tuesday, October 7: The Third Branch and How they Interpret the Supreme Law

Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 9

(ONLINE): NPR—“Supreme Court conservative may strike another blow to landmark Voting Rights Act”—[link](#)

Thursday, October 9: Midterm Review

Reading: *None*

Video: Paper Assignment Description—Watch Video on Course Moodle

- **Week 7— October 13- 17: Midterm and Paper Topic Fall Break**

Tuesday, October 14: Fall Break—No Class

Reading: *None*

Thursday, October 16: MIDTERM TODAY

Reading: *None*

NOTE: First Campus Talk must be completed by today!

PART III: AMERICAN POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

- **Week 8— October 20- 24: Civil Rights**

Tuesday, October 21: The Past

Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 5

Thursday, October 23: The Present

Reading: [America’s Long Overdue Awakening to Systemic Racism](#), *TIME Magazine* article by Justin Worland (June 11, 2020). Available on Moodle

- **Week 9— October 27- October 31: Public Opinion**

Tuesday, October 28: How to Measure

Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 10

Thursday, October 30: What we Measure

Reading: (ONLINE) “Polling Paradox: Poll results depend on pollster choices” ([Good Authority](#))

- **Week 10— November 3 - 7: Elections and Campaigns**

Tuesday, November 4:

Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 15, pages (497-525)

(ONLINE): “American elections need help. Here’s how to make them better.” *The Washington Post* article by Nathaniel Persily (January 22, 2014).

Statewide Election: Ballot Measure—VOTE!!

Thursday, November 6:

Reading: (ONLINE): “Campaign Contributions Facilitate Access to Congressional Officials: A Field Experiment.” *American Journal of Political Science* journal article by Joshua L. Kalla and David Broockman (2015).

- **Week 11— November 10- 14: Voting Behavior**

Tuesday, November 11: Voter Turnout

Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 15, pages (426-443)

(ONLINE): “Is America a democracy? If so, why does it deny millions the vote?”—

[Link](#)

!!Paper Outline Due Today—Upload to Moodle in .PDF before class!!

Thursday, November 13: Vote Choice

Reading: (ONLINE): “How politics makes us stupid. *Vox* article by Ezra Klein (April 6, 2014). [Link](#)

- **Week 12— November 17- 21: Political Parties & Fourth Branch of Government**

Tuesday, November 18: Political Parties

Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 14

Thursday, November 20: Media day 1

Reading: *B&W*: Chapter 11

NOTE: Because next week is Thanksgiving Break, you’re running out of time to complete your second campus talk. I would get it finished this week!

- **Week 13— November 24-28: Thanksgiving Break**

November 25: No Class

November 27: No Class

- **Week 14— December 1- 5: Media and Final Exam Review**

December 2: Fourth Branch of Government

Reading: (ONLINE): “Media Coverage of Kilmar Abrego Garcia hurt Trump, not Democrats”

December 4: Final Exam Review

!!PAPER DUE TODAY!! Upload to Moodle BEFORE class in .PDF format

- **Week 15/16: December 10th –15th Final Exam Window**
 - Take-Home Exam: Time and Date—TBD???
 - **NOTE:** Although it is a take-home exam, it is still timed and students should expect to be available to take the exam during our assigned exam window.