This course provides an introductory overview of American politics with an emphasis on current political controversies and debates. You will have the opportunity to consider and discuss a range of institutional and behavioral issues such as the timelessness of the US Constitution, the effectiveness of the legislative process, and the rationality of American public opinion and voting behavior.

Course Objectives
This course has four major objectives:
1. To introduce you to the basics of American politics. By the end of the course, you will have acquired a solid (i.e., better) understanding of how the American government was formed, how it works, and the public’s role in the American political system.
2. To engage you in the study of American politics. Despite what you might have heard, American politics is fascinating! This course strives to spark interest and curiosity in various political topics and current events, both for future academic study and for personal consideration.
3. To have you critically evaluate and debate issues in American democracy. You will be asked to question your preconceived ideas about American politics and think more deeply about how well the American political system works.
4. To help you form and express political opinions. You will have numerous opportunities to carefully evaluate political information and make compelling arguments. Honing these skills will not only make you a better democratic citizen, it will also impress friends and family during your next political discussion!

Class Structure
Research in educational psychology shows that people have different learning styles—some learn best from reading or hearing things, others are visual learners, and still others learn best by doing things in a hands-on manner. With this in mind, the class will incorporate various teaching methods to help students learn the material in the most effective way possible. Classes will generally mix lecture (auditory), discussion and participation (hands-on), and an occasional electronic presentation (auditory and visual).

Current Events: We will begin most classes with a brief discussion of current political events. You are required to follow the news on a daily basis using a reputable news source (e.g., The New York Times, CNN, The News Hour with Jim Lehrer). Your ability to effectively discuss current political events will factor into your participation score.

Lecture: A portion of class time will typically be devoted to lectures. Lectures will generally follow the topics covered in the readings; however, they will also include new and important
information that students can expect to see on exams. The Power Point lecture slides will be available on Blackboard after class.

Active Learning: Actively engaging with material is one of the best ways to learn it. Therefore, considerable emphasis will be given to student participation in this class. You will frequently participate in facilitated discussions (sometimes on predetermined discussion questions) and simulations. I will also call on you from time to time to ensure that you have an opportunity to demonstrate your thinking on particular issues—be ready! Discussion, debate, and action represent the essence of politics so your active participation in this class is required.

Course Requirements and Grading
Final grades will be based on class participation, three short essays, a series of quizzes, and two in-class exams. The relative weight and due date of each component is as follows:

Class Participation: 10%
Quizzes: 15% (unannounced throughout the semester)
First Exam: 15% (March 24th)
Second Exam: 15% (May 12th)
Three Discussion Question Essays: 15% each (March 8th, April 12th, May 21st)

Participation (10%): As not everyone is equally verbose, participation grades will be based on the quality, not the quantity, of participation. Quality participation requires consistent attendance, thoughtful contributions, and a positive attitude toward the class and its activities—even if something irks you, hiding your disdain and/or pretending that you actually like it will improve your participation grade!

Quizzes (15%): Having an opinion on a political issue is great but having an informed opinion is much better. To ensure that students are gaining background knowledge and mastering the basic concepts found in the readings, quizzes will be administered throughout the semester. Quizzes may be given at any time during class periods—there will be no warning—and no make-up quizzes will be given under any circumstances. You must take each quiz when it is given; if you miss the quiz, you get 0. You can, however, elect to have your two lowest quiz scores dropped in exchange for dropping your two highest quiz scores.

Exams (15% each): There will be two in-class, closed-book, 75-minute exams in this course. The first will occur on March 24th and the second will take place on May 12th. Questions on each exam will be drawn from the readings and information presented during class. The second exam will focus primarily, but not exclusively, on material from the second half of the course.

Discussion Question Essays (15% each): You are required to write three discussion question essays. Appendix 1, at the end of this document, provides details on how these should be written. You must submit your first paper on or before March 8th at 11:00 am, your second on or before April 12th at 11:00 am, and your third on or before May 21st at 11:00 am. Each paper must be submitted via Blackboard in a single MS Word file. Late essays will NOT be accepted without an “incomplete” from the College. If your paper is not properly uploaded to Blackboard by the deadline, you will receive 0—so plan accordingly!
Final Grades

Final letter grades will be assigned in the following way.

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<th>Grade</th>
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General Course Policies

Courtesy
Please exercise common courtesy (e.g., no talking at inappropriate times, sleeping, Internet browsing, cell phones) so that you and your classmates are able to get the most out of lectures and discussions. Some of the topics we will be discussing are controversial; it is fine to disagree, but please do so in a respectful manner.

Honor Code
Oberlin College policy mandates that your performance in this class adhere to the honor code. In general terms, this means that you will be given significant freedoms in exchange for your promise to not cheat, plagiarize material, fabricate information, or participate in any other dishonest academic activity. If you have any questions about the honor code, I encourage you to visit: [http://www.oberlin.edu/students/links-life/rulesregs_pdf/Rules+Regs06_HonorCode.pdf](http://www.oberlin.edu/students/links-life/rulesregs_pdf/Rules+Regs06_HonorCode.pdf).

Disabilities
Any student with a documented disability should see me immediately so that we can make reasonable accommodations.

Topics and Readings

The following book is *required* and can be purchased from the college bookstore. Two copies are also available on reserve in the library.


Other *required* readings (e.g., chapters, articles) are available on the Blackboard site for this class. Login to Blackboard with your email username and click on ‘Readings’ to find the material. You are expected to do all of the required readings before the class meeting for which they are assigned.
Class One (February 8th): **Class Introduction**

Class Two (February 10th): **Government and Politics Overview**
This class introduces the study of American government and politics. We will discuss the meaning of politics and think about how and why governments are created. We will also spend some time discussing the work of political scientists—what does a political scientist actually do?

Required Reading:
- Lowi et al., Chapter 1 “Introduction: Making Sense of Government and Politics” (pages 1-18)

Optional Readings:

Class Three (February 15th): **The Founding and Constitution**
To understand American politics, we must first understand the founding and the creation of the constitution. In this class, we will explore the history behind the founding and the debated motivations that led to the various features of the United States constitution. Why, out of all of the available options, did the founders create this constitution?

Required Readings:
- Lowi et al., Chapter 2 “The Founding and the Constitution” (pages 20-47)

Optional Readings:

Discussion Question:
- Is the system of “separation of powers” and “checks and balances” able to handle the current challenges facing the United States? Would the United States be better off with a more efficient form of government that would allow for quicker action and more centralized accountability?
Class Four (February 17th): **Our Constitutional Convention**
While many revere the constitution, some have suggested that its flaws are in need of repair. History shows, however, that writing a constitution can be very difficult. In this class, you will critically evaluate the current US constitution and attempt to draft a new and improved constitution. Come prepared to actively engage in our own constitutional convention. Details are found in the “Rules for a Constitutional Convention” handout.

Required Readings:
- “Rules for a Constitutional Convention”

Class Five (February 22nd): **Federalism and the Separation of Powers**
One of the great compromises in the constitutional convention was the creation of a federal system of government with separation of powers. In this class, we will explore the motivations for this system of government and analyze the contemporary implications of federalism on a host of critical political issues. How well does federalism work in the United States?

Required Readings:
- Lowi, et al., Chapter 3 “Federalism and the Separation of Powers” (pages 48-73)

Optional Reading:

Discussion Question:
- Does the federal government have too much power relative to the states? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of a reduced federal presence in state matters?

Class Six (February 24th): **The Individual and the Constitution: Civil Liberties**
The United States was initially founded with the language of “freedoms” although its history has often challenged the veracity of these claims. In this class, we will examine the government’s relationship to the individual in terms of civil liberties. We will look specifically at the debate between civil liberties and national security in a post-911 era.

Required Readings:
- Lowi, et al., Chapter 4 “Civil Liberties and Civil Rights” (pages 74-93)
Discussion Question:

* Security concerns often compromise the protection of civil liberties. What, if any, techniques (e.g., surveillance, torture) might the US government be justified in using against terrorism suspects? Where should we draw the line between security and civil liberties?

Class Seven (March 1st): **The Individual and the Constitution: Civil Rights**

The Bill of Rights established that all citizens had certain government-protected rights. However, the struggle to secure these rights in practice has been one of America’s most challenging tasks. This class is devoted to understanding the historical and contemporary struggle for civil rights in America.

**Required Readings:**

* Lowi, et al., Chapter 4 “Civil Liberties and Civil Rights” (pages 94-118)

**Discussion Question:**

* Several campus administrators have shut down “affirmative action bake sales,” protests against affirmative action in which white students are charged more for cookies than minorities. Critics argue that such events are racist and disrespectful, while defenders note that this is precisely the kind of symbolic speech at the core of the First Amendment. What do you think?
* What does the election of Barack Obama say about the state of racial politics in the US? To what extent does his election signify a new era in racial harmony and equality?
Class Eight (March 3rd): Congress I
Congress is the principle legislative body in the United States government and thus quite important to the health of the country and the prosperity of its citizens. In this class, we will look at the functions of Congress, how members act in Congress, and the public’s relationship with Congress.

Required Readings:
- Lowi, et al., Chapter 5 “Congress: The First Branch” (pages 119-152)

Discussion Question:
- Does Congress work well for the citizens it represents or is Congress “broken”?

Class Nine (March 8th): Congress II
This class is devoted to getting our hands dirty with a congressional simulation. Please read the simulation rules—i.e., “Lawmaking”—and come prepared to actively participate in the law-making process. Feel free to strategize and/or organize before class begins.

Required Readings:

Discussion Question:
- Congress is generally unpopular, whereas individual members are popular and usually get reelected. Why does the institution suffer while incumbents shine?

First Written Answer is Due before 11:00 am. Please submit via Blackboard.

Class Ten (March 10th): The Presidency
Most people believe that the president is the country’s most powerful political figure. However, a president’s power is often constrained and he (possibly ‘she’ soon) often has to bargain for power. In this class, we will discuss the constitutional and practical role of the president. We will examine the relationship between the president and the public, and the longstanding debate about presidential powers.

Required Readings:
Discussion Question:

- The framers envisioned a president with limited powers. Many believe, however, that the presidency has increasingly gained power over time. Do you think the president currently has too much, not enough, or the right amount of power?

Class Eleven (March 15th): The Bureaucracy

On the surface, the national bureaucracy may seem quite boring. Indeed, bureaucracies by their very nature are large, complex, and often difficult to understand. However, there are many fascinating aspects of the American bureaucracy that we will cover in this class. In particular, we will examine the relative power of the bureaucracy and congressional oversight.

Required Readings:

- Lowi, et al., Chapter 7 “The Executive Branch” (pages 152-174)

Discussion Question:

- Imagine that you are the head of a small federal agency, and an employee comes up with a plausible plan that would allow your agency to provide the same level of service with half the budget and half the staff that you currently have. What do you do? Do you present the plan to Congress? Why or why not? How do you think Congress would react if you did propose the plan?

Class Twelve (March 17th): No Class Meeting Scheduled

I will be out of town at a conference on this day so there is no class scheduled. Please use the time to study for the exam and/or write your second paper.
Class Thirteen (March 22nd): The Judiciary
Alexander Hamilton argued that the judiciary would be the “least dangerous” branch of government although history has proven this to be debatable. Indeed, the judiciary in general and the Supreme Court in particular are institutions within which a great deal of consequential political action occurs. In this class, we will look at the constitutional structure of the federal judicial system and discuss how the courts relate to other political institutions and public opinion.

Required Readings:

Optional Reading:

Discussion Question:
• Judicial review is not found in the Constitution; it came about after Marbury v. Madison. How would you evaluate the history of judicial review? Has it generally been good or bad for America? Would we be better off without it?

Class Fourteen (March 24th): Midterm Exam
The midterm exam will take place during our regular meeting time in our regular classroom. Exam questions will be based on assigned readings and material presented in class.

March 29th and 31st – Spring Break

Class Fifteen (April 5th): Public Opinion
Public opinion is often considered the lifeblood of democracy. Therefore, understanding the nature and origins of public opinion is critical to understanding the overall health of a democracy like the United States. Past research has shown, however, that American public opinion is not always well considered or easy to understand. In this class, we will evaluate American public opinion, discuss its origins and influences, and consider some of the difficulties associated with measuring public opinion.

Required Readings:
Class Sixteen (April 7th): Public Opinion and the Media

This class explores the media’s role in shaping public opinion. We will look at the subtle ways that the media can influence public opinion and evaluate the media’s ability to cover politics and provide citizens with useful political information. We will also consider the relative objectivity/bias of the media’s political reporting as neutrality has often been considered necessary for the media to be democracy’s ‘watchdog’.

Required Readings:

• Lowi, et al., Chapter 9 “Public Opinion and the Media” (pages 272-283)

Discussion Question:

• According to Howard Myrick, “In a democracy, people often get the government they deserve; they also get the media they deserve.” To what extent is this true in the United States? Are Americans getting “the media they deserve”? 
Class Seventeen (April 12\textsuperscript{th}): **Political Participation**  
Voting is the most common form of political participation. However, voting turnout has been relatively low in the United States for many years and recent elections have uncovered important issues with the way votes are cast and counted. In this class, we will discuss elections and voting in America by focusing on voter turnout and the possibility that immigrants (i.e., legal and documented non-citizens) should be allowed to vote.

Required Readings:
- Lowi, et al., Chapter 10 “Elections” (pages 284-303)

Discussion Question:
- Is increasing mass political participation, by definition, a good thing? Is it “elitist” to believe that it may not be?
- Should immigrants (i.e., documented non-citizens living in the US) be allowed to vote in American elections?

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**Discussion Question:**  
Second Written Answer is Due before 11:00 am. Please submit via Blackboard.

Class Eighteen (April 14\textsuperscript{th}): **Voting Behavior**  
Significant research has sought to understand how people vote in America. This class reviews some of the findings by addressing the following questions: How do Americans decide for whom to vote? Are their vote choices rational and/or well informed? Do their vote choices need to be rational and/or well informed?

Required Readings:
- Lowi, et al., Chapter 10 “Elections” (pages 303-312)

Discussion Question:
• Political scientists have long debated the quality of American voting behavior. Some claim that voters are irrational and capricious while others maintain that “voters are not fools”. What do you think? Are American voters fools?

Class Nineteen (April 19th): **Campaigns and Elections**
In this class we will touch on the strategies that candidates use to gain our support. We will then focus on the representativeness of American elections. We will look at how elections are structured and the connection between election outcomes and the will of the people.

Required Reading:
• Lowi, et al., Chapter 10 “Elections” (pages 312-325)
• Lowi et al., “Analyzing the 2010 Midterm Elections” (E17-E32)

Discussion Question:
• To what extent do American elections accurately reflect the will of the people? Are there changes that could be made that would make American elections more representative?

Class Twenty (April 26th): **Political Parties and Contemporary Political Culture**
Political parties are important in American politics both for organizational and social identification reasons. This class explores the development of the American party system and seeks to understand why the United States has, throughout so much of its history, been a two-party system. We will also look at how the party system relates to contemporary political culture and the idea of a “culture war” in America.

Required Readings:
• Lowi, et al., Chapter 11 “Political Parties” (pages 326-351)

Optional Readings:

Discussion Questions:
• There has long been talk about third parties in American politics, including recent discussion about the sustainability of the Tea Party movement. How would a third party (or even an independent presidential candidate in 2012) affect American politics? In what ways, if any, would a third party improve American politics?
• Is there a “culture war” in America in which the public is deeply split on a range of key issues? If not, why is there so much discussion of a “culture war”? If there is, in fact, a “culture war” in America, should we be worried about it?

Class Twenty-One (April 28th): Interest Groups
This class is devoted to analyzing interest groups in America. We will discuss their development and debate the relative pros and cons of their participation in the American political system. To what extent do interest groups serve an important role in American politics?

Required Readings:
• Lowi, et al., Chapter 12 “Groups and Interests” (pages 352-380)

Discussion Questions:
• Placing restrictions on interest group activities is difficult because of the constitutional protections afforded to these groups. The Constitution guarantees the right to assemble and to petition government, and it also guarantees freedom of speech. All of these are the essence of interest group activity. Nonetheless, many Americans are uneasy with the influence wielded by organized interest groups. What, if any, restrictions on interest groups would you be comfortable with? Can you think of any instances where the influence of groups should be limited (for example, political extremists like various militia groups, or large political-action committees in electoral campaigns)?
Class Twenty-Two (May 3rd): **Public Policy**

In many ways, public policy is where ‘the rubber hits the road’ in American politics. Public policies are the actions that governments take in an attempt to improve the lives of citizens. Yet, developing, enacting, and monitoring public policy can be a very messy business. This class examines the public policy process and challenges students to evaluate the effectiveness of current regulatory and redistributive policies.

Required Readings:
- Lowi, et al., Chapter 13 “Introduction to Public Policy” (pages 382-413)

Discussion Question:
- Has the government become too involved in protecting us from ourselves? Do you think there should be more or less government regulation of potentially harmful personal behaviors like smoking, over-eating, and drug-use?
- Health Care has been a matter of considerable debate in the US for more than twenty years. What, if any, changes would you make to the current US Health Care system? In other words, what type of health care system do you think the US should have?

Class Twenty-Three (May 5th): **Foreign Policy**

As the world’s only true superpower, the US has considerable interest in the affairs of other countries. This class is devoted to understanding the ethos behind US foreign policy and the history of US involvement around the world.

Required Readings:
- Lowi, et al., Chapter 14 “Foreign Policy and Democracy” (pages 414-443)


Discussion Questions:

• The United States has long had an active but selective foreign policy, getting involved in certain matters around the globe while bypassing others. How would you characterize this foreign policy approach? Has the US been too engaged? Not engaged enough? Misguided in its engagement?

Class Twenty-Four (May 10\textsuperscript{th}): **Review, Wrap-Up and Fun Stuff**

For our last class we will review material for the second exam, wrap-up any loose ends, and engage in one last fun exercise. Students who attend this class may be eligible for a rather significant reward.

Class Twenty-Five (May 12\textsuperscript{th}): **Second Exam**

The second exam will take place during our regular meeting time in our regular classroom. Exam questions will be primarily, but not exclusively, based on assigned readings and class material presented during the second part of the semester.

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<th>Discussion Question:</th>
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<td>Third Written Answer is Due before 11:00 am on <strong>Saturday, May 21\textsuperscript{st}</strong>. Please submit via Blackboard.</td>
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Appendix 1: Discussion Question Guidelines  
Polt 100: Introduction to American Politics  

Assignments and Deadlines: You are required to provide written answers to three of the discussion questions from the syllabus. Your first answer is due on or before March 8th at 11:00 am, your second is due on or before April 12th at 11:00 am, and your third is due on or before May 21st at 11:00 am. Late papers will NOT be accepted without an “incomplete” from the College (computer explosions, problems with your roommate, bad weather, etc. are not sufficient). Consider this your warning. Also, remember that Blackboard notes exactly when your paper is submitted and, yes, a paper that comes in at 11:01 am on the due date is late and will not count. I strongly encourage you to submit your answers early to avoid any last minute stress and/or disappointment.

Which Questions? You are free to answer any three of the questions on the syllabus. This means that you may answer a question that we have already covered in class or you may skip ahead to one that we have yet to cover. You also have the option of creating and answering your own question. Your proposed question must be relevant and must be approved, in writing, by me BEFORE you start to answer it.

Mechanics: Each paper must be 4-5 pages (double spaced) with normal font and margins. Please list your name, the course title (i.e., Polt 100), and the date in the top left hand corner of the first page. Include the actual question, in italics, before starting your answer. Also include page numbers and a header or footer with your name on each page. All citations should be parenthetical in the text with a corresponding bibliography.1 Finally, please submit your paper (including your bibliography) as a single Microsoft Word file so that I can grade it using track changes—i.e., do not use Word Perfect, Pages, PDF, etc. Failure to follow these simple guidelines may result in a lower grade.

Organization and Argument Guidelines: Your answer should start with an introduction in which you clearly state your argument. Do not leave your argument to the end—this is not a suspense novel. The body of your paper should substantiate your argument with logical claims and empirical evidence. Your evidence should come from both class material and outside research. Think of your argument as a lawyer does—present a logical and substantiated case in which you explain to the jury (i.e., me) why I should believe what you believe. Make sure your argument is well organized, clear, logical, and supported by evidence. End your paper with a concluding paragraph (i.e., closing argument) in which you restate and summarize the main points of your argument.

Writing Process: Keep a few simple suggestions in mind when writing your paper. Start your paper early so that you have enough time to do a good job. (I know you’ve heard that before but I really mean it!) You should prepare to write your paper before you actually sit down to write it. Do some research and get your thoughts organized (e.g., write an outline). You might even bounce some of your ideas off me during office hours. You should also write more than one

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1 For example, you might write "According to Smith (2010: 213), dogs don't like cats." Or “Some authors contend that dogs do not like cats (Smith 2010: 213; Jones 2009: 113) while others claim that is untrue (Brown 2008: 456)."
draft of your paper. It helps to write a draft, leave it for a while, and then go back to it. Finally, have someone else proofread your paper for grammatical errors—we often miss these in our own writing, and they can distract the reader from important points.

**Grading and Feedback:** I will grade your paper using track changes and return it to you via Blackboard. You should read my comments carefully and ask for clarification if anything is unclear. You are advised to incorporate this feedback into your subsequent papers. You should also be aware that I will assign a grade to your paper based on the following:

An “A” paper will have most or all of the following attributes:
- Main argument is very clear, original and convincing
- Main argument is supported with sufficient and appropriate evidence from both class material and outside research
- The paper is organized appropriately and flows well with smooth transitions between paragraphs
- The writing is clear and effective; there are no grammatical or typographical errors
- All sources are correctly cited in the text and listed in the bibliography

A “B” paper will have most or all of the following attributes:
- Main argument is clear, fairly original and more or less convincing
- Main argument is generally supported with evidence from both class material and outside research
- Generally flows well although there are some minor problems with organization within and between paragraphs
- The writing adheres to grammatical conventions (i.e., few grammatical or typographical errors) but is not especially eloquent
- Most sources are correctly cited in the text and listed in the bibliography

A “C” paper will have most or all of the following attributes:
- Main argument is somewhat unclear, lacks originality and is less than convincing
- Main argument is supported with little evidence from either class material or outside research
- Significant problems with organization within and between paragraphs
- The writing is unclear and ineffective; there are grammatical and/or typographical errors
- Many sources are incorrectly cited in the text and/or missing from the bibliography

A “D” paper will have most or all of the following attributes:
- Main argument is unclear, unoriginal and unconvincing
- Main argument is not supported with evidence from either class material or outside research
- Little logical flow within and between paragraphs
- The writing is unclear and ineffective; there are significant grammatical and/or typographical errors
- Most sources are incorrectly cited in the text and/or missing from the bibliography

As you can probably tell, I do not think every paper is worthy of an A. It is certainly possible to get an A on your paper although you will really have to do high-quality work. I am sure that you will agree that an A should actually mean something!