Politics 100: Introduction to American Politics
Spring 2015
Tuesday and Thursday, 1:30-2:45 in King 106
Michael Parkin
775-6197
mparkin@oberlin.edu
Office Hours: Thursday and Friday from 3:00 to 4:30 in Rice 203
Office Hour Signup: http://tinyurl.com/ParkinOffice

This course provides an introductory overview of American politics with an emphasis on current 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 U.S. Constitution, the effectiveness of the legislative process, and the rationality of American public opinion and voting behavior.

Course Objectives
This course has four main 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 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 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 for those opinions. 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 occasional electronic presentations (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 PBS News Hour). Your ability to effectively discuss current political events will factor into your participation score.

Lecture: A portion of each class will typically be devoted to lectures. Lectures will generally follow the topics covered in the readings and will include other important details that you can expect to see on exams. The PowerPoint 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 are 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, and two in-class exams. The relative weight and due date of each component is as follows:

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<th>Component</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two Exams</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>March 19th and May 7th</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three Discussion Question Essays</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>March 7th, April 18th, and May 16th</td>
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Participation (10%): As not everyone is equally verbose, participation grades will be based on the quality, not the quantity, of your 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 continuing to be active in a thoughtful way will improve your participation grade! I will also administer quizzes throughout the semester that will factor into your participation grade. Specifically, quiz scores will be used to substantiate or bolster verbal participation scores. 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 the quiz when it is given; if you miss the quiz, you get 0.

Exams (15% each): There will be two in-class, closed-book, 75-minute exams in this course. The first will occur on March 19th and the second will take place on May 7th. Questions on each exam will be drawn from the readings and information presented during class. The second exam will focus almost exclusively on material from the second half of the course.

Discussion Question Essays (20% each): You are required to write three discussion question essays, which are to be 4 to 5 pages each (double spaced). 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 7th at 11:00 am, your second paper on or before April 18th at 11:00 am, and your third paper on or before May 16th at 11:00 am. Each paper must be submitted via Blackboard as a single MS Word file. Extensions will NOT be granted and late papers will NOT be accepted without official documentation. If your paper is not properly uploaded to Blackboard by the deadline, you will receive a 0—plan accordingly! Your graded papers will be returned to you via Blackboard.

Final Grades
Final letter grades will be assigned in the following way:

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General Course Policies

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

1 This is an absolute deadline! To be safe, you should assume that all of the following will happen to you 24 hours before your paper is due: (1) you will get in an argument with your roommate; (2) your computer will crash; (3) the fire alarm in your building will go off repeatedly in the middle of the night; (4) you will get some curious illness for which Health Services has no cure; and (5) six feet of snow will fall within a 20-minute period. In short, you do not have the luxury of leaving your paper until the last minute! You are being warned now so that you have plenty of time to get the papers done. Remember, there is no shame in submitting your paper early. In fact, I strongly recommend that you submit your paper at least 24 hours before it is due. This is the best way to avoid the heartache you will feel if you submit the paper late and receive a 0.
Although you are welcome to take notes on a laptop, you must also bring a pen and paper to each class. If I find that your laptop use is disruptive or distracting to others (e.g., you are checking Facebook rather than paying attention), I will ask you to turn off your computer and take notes the old-fashioned way.

**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 freedom 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, you should visit [http://new.oberlin.edu/office/dean-of-students/honor/students.dot](http://new.oberlin.edu/office/dean-of-students/honor/students.dot).

**Accommodations**

Any student with a documented need for accommodation should see me immediately.

**Topics and Readings**

The textbook for this course is *optional*. If this is your first class in American politics, I suggest that you purchase a copy of the book listed below. It provides basic information that you will need to succeed in this class. Copies are available at the campus bookstore and online. However, if you are already familiar with American politics (e.g., you took AP American Government in high school), you may only need to skim the chapters in this book, or you may be able to go without it altogether. I will let you judge the necessity of purchasing the text.


Other *required* readings (e.g., chapters, articles) are available on Blackboard. You are expected to do all of the required readings before the class meeting for which they are assigned. Be prepared to answer questions about these readings at a moment’s notice. Please let me know if you cannot find a copy of any of the *optional* readings.

Class One (February 3rd): **Class Introduction**

Class Two (February 5th): **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:


Class Three (February 10th): **The Founding and Constitution**

To understand American politics we must first understand the founding and the creation of the Constitution. To that end, we will explore the history of the founding and the debated motivations that led to the various features of the U.S. Constitution. Why, out of all of the available options, did the founders create this constitution? We will also look at the ratification debate and compare key aspects of the U.S. Constitution to political systems in other countries to show just how unique the American system is.
Required Readings:
- *The Constitution of the United States of America and Amendments to the Constitution* (skim)
- Alexander Hamilton “The Federalist, No. 15”
- Brutus, “The Antifederalist, No. 1”
- James Madison “The Federalist, No. 51”

Optional Readings:

Discussion Questions:
- If you were living in the 1780s, would you have supported the proposed Constitution (federalists), or would you have opposed it (anti-federalists)? Why?
- Is the system of “separation of powers” and “checks and balances” able to handle the current challenges facing the United States? Would the U.S. be better off with a more efficient form of government that allowed for quicker action and more centralized accountability (e.g., a Parliamentary style of government)?

Class Four (February 12th): **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 U.S. Constitution and attempt to draft a new and improved document. Come prepared to actively engage in this Constitutional Convention. Details are found in the “Rules for a Constitutional Convention” handout.

Required Readings:
- “Rules for a Constitutional Convention”

Discussion Question:
- Although the U.S. Constitution has only been completely overhauled once (the revision of the Articles of Confederation), there have been many amendments to it over the years. What might be the advantages of completely overhauling the U.S. Constitution—i.e., starting with a blank slate—rather than changing it through individual amendments? What kinds of sweeping changes might be possible with this “blank slate” approach? (Adapted from Smith 2013: 27).

Class Five (February 17th): **Federalism**
One of the great compromises at the Constitutional Convention was the creation of a federal system of government with separation of powers. In this class, we will explore the motivation for this system 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:

- James Madison “The Federalist, No. 46”

Optional Reading:


Discussion Question:

- Who should control _______ policy, the national government or the states? Pick a contentious policy area (e.g., medical marijuana, immigration, health care, same-sex marriage) and explain why you think either the federal government or the states ought to have primary control over it. (Your argument should go beyond constitutional provisions and ideological beliefs.)

Class Six (February 19th): **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 debates dealing with free speech and privacy.

Required Readings:


Optional Readings:
• Lowi, et al., Chapter 4 “Civil Liberties and Civil Rights,” 84-107.

Discussion Question:
• Would you support a college “speech code” that prohibited expressions from (a) a group or individual that denied that the Holocaust had occurred; (b) a group or individual that argued against any sort of affirmative action; or (c) an environmental group that advocated violence against the property of corporations that polluted the environment? (Adapted from Canon, et al., 156)
• The U.S. Constitution does not expressly protect the right to privacy, and yet many Americans believe that the right to privacy is a fundamental civil liberty. Should Americans have a right to privacy? Are there any conditions under which the right to privacy should be restricted, suspended or abridged?

Class Seven (February 24th): The Individual and the Constitution: Civil Rights
The Bill of Rights established that all citizens have certain government-protected rights. However, the struggle to secure these rights in practice has been one of America’s greatest challenges. This class is devoted to understanding the historical and contemporary struggle for civil rights in America.

Required Readings:
• Malcolm X. 1964. “The Ballot or the Bullet” or listen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9BVEnEsn6Y

Optional Readings:
• Lowi, et al., Chapter 4 “Civil Liberties and Civil Rights,” 108-131.

Discussion Question:
• For many, the election and presidency of Barack Obama signal a new era in American race relations. Some have even called it a “post-racial” era. Others, however, are less sanguine. What do Obama’s election and presidency really say about the state of race relations in this country?
Class Eight (February 26th): Congress I
Congress is the principle legislative body in the United States 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. Why do people have such a low opinion of Congress?

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Discussion Question:
- Approval of Congress is at an all time low. In fact, more than 90% of Americans think that Congress does not work well. What reforms, if any, would improve Congress and make it more popular with the American people?

Class Nine (March 3rd): 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?

Class Ten (March 5th): 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. We will then use this background to evaluate the Obama presidency.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:

Discussion Question:
- Barack Obama was swept to power with much fanfare in 2008. His presidency has since faced numerous challenges, leaving some disappointed. Given all of the opportunities and obstacles, how would you rate the Obama presidency?

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Class Eleven (March 10th): 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, as well as the question of government privatization.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:
• Lowi, et al., Chapter 7 “The Executive Branch,” 204-237.

Discussion Question:
• Some critics of government inefficiency argue that nearly every domestic government function—from schools to road building—could be run more efficiently if it were ‘privatized’—i.e., turned over to private contractors. Do you agree? Are there any government functions that lend themselves (or do not lend themselves) particularly well to privatization? (Adapted from Canon et al., 256)
• What incentives do lawmakers have to carefully control the bureaucracy? What might lawmakers gain from taking a relatively “hands-off” approach to their normal oversight duties?

Class Twelve (March 12th): 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? Have its benefits outweighed its costs? Would we be better off without it?
• The courts are resolving an increasing number of political questions that divide society from abortion and gun control to immigration, campaign finance and health care reform. Do you think putting the courts in the mix and adding another check to existing checks and balances makes policy better? Or is it inappropriate for courts to get involved with political issues? Does political engagement of the courts come at the expense of democracy?
Class Thirteen (March 17th): **Midterm Review**  
This class is devoted to review for the midterm exam. Please come prepared to ask and answer questions from the first half of the course.

Class Fourteen (March 19th): **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 24th and 26th – **Spring Break**

Class Fifteen (March 31st): **Public Opinion and the Media**  
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. In this class, we will consider how public opinion is formed, measured and affected by the media.

Required Readings:

Optional Reading:
- Lowi, et al., Chapter 9 “Public Opinion and the Media,” 274-308.

Discussion Question:
- How would you rate the quality of American public opinion on a scale from embarrassingly bad to well-informed and thoughtful? What are the implications of this?
- 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 Sixteen (April 2nd): **No Class Meeting**  
I will be away at a conference on this day. Please use the time to start on your second essay.
Class Seventeen (April 7th): **Political Participation**

Voting is the most common form of political participation. However, 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., documented non-citizens) should be allowed to vote.

**Required Readings:**

**Optional Readings:**

**Discussion Question:**
- Is increasing mass political participation, by definition, a good thing? Is it “elitist” to believe that it may not be? If participation should be increased, what is the best way to do it?

Class Eighteen (April 9th): **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 they vote? Are their vote choices rational and/or well informed? Do their vote choices need to be rational and/or well informed?

**Required Readings:**

Optional Readings:

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

Class Nineteen (April 14th): **Campaigns and Elections**
In this class we will analyze the representativeness of American campaigns and elections. We will look at how elections are structured and the connection between election outcomes and the will of the people. We will focus specifically on the role of campaign contributions and voter photo-ID laws. How well do campaigns and elections work in this country?

Required Reading:

Optional Readings:

Discussion Question:
• To what extent do American elections accurately reflect the will of the people? What changes, if any, should be made to make American elections more representative?
Class Twenty (April 16th): **No Class Meeting**
I will be away at a conference on this day. Please use the time to finish your second essay.

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**Discussion Question Essay:**
Second Written Answer is Due before **Saturday, April 18th before 11:00 am**.
Please submit via Blackboard.

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Class Twenty-One (April 21st): **Political Parties and Contemporary Political Culture**
The United States has a unique political culture that is reflected in the political party system. This class starts with an investigation of core political values that looks at the relationship between personal expectations and capitalism, and the supposed “culture war” currently underway. We will then focus on America’s two-party system and the rise of the Tea Party movement.

**Required Readings:**

**Optional Readings:**

**Discussion Questions:**
- Has the “American Dream” done more to help or hurt American political, social and economic progress?
- Political disagreement is inherent in any democracy, and yet some have started to express concern at the degree of partisan division and rancor that has developed lately in the United States. To what extent has
political polarization become a “problem” for the healthy functioning of American government and society? If polarization has become a “problem,” is there anything that can be done to fix it?

Class Twenty-Two (April 23rd): Interest Groups
This class is devoted to analyzing interest groups. We will discuss their development and debate the relative pros and cons of their participation in the American political system. Our main focus will be to challenge widely held assumptions and determine the extent to which interest groups serve an important role in American politics. To get at this, we will consider the academic evidence before engaging in a brief simulation.

Required Readings:

Optional Readings:
- Lowi, et al., Chapter 12 “Groups and Interests,” 384-415.

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. Nevertheless, 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 certain groups or their influence should be limited? (Adapted from Canon et al., 203)

Class Twenty-Three (April 28th): Public Policy
In many ways, public policy is where ‘the rubber meets the road’ in American politics. Public policies are the actions that governments take in an attempt to improve citizens’ lives. Yet, developing, enacting, and monitoring public policy can be a messy business. This class examines the public policy process and challenges students to evaluate the effectiveness of current regulatory and redistributive policies.

Required Readings:


Optional Readings:

• Lowi, et al., Chapter 13 “Introduction to Public Policy,” 416-445.


Discussion Question:

• What, if anything, should the federal government do to reduce economic inequality in the United States? What chances do your plans have for being enacted and what would be their broad political, economic, and social consequences?

Class Twenty-Four (April 30th): Foreign Policy

As the world’s only true superpower, the U.S. has considerable interest in the affairs of other countries. This class is devoted to understanding the ethos behind U.S. foreign policy and the history of U.S. involvement around the world. What motivates foreign policy makers and are their perceptions accurate? More specifically, to what extent should the United States ‘police’ the rest of the world?

Required Readings:


Optional Readings:
  • Lowi, et al., Chapter 14 “Foreign Policy and Democracy,” 446-473.

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 U.S. been too engaged? Not engaged enough? Misguided in its engagement?

Class Twenty-Five (May 5th): **Review, Wrap-Up and Fun Stuff**
For our last formal class meeting, 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-Six (May 7th): **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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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. (See due dates above.) Late papers will NOT be accepted without official documentation from the College or other source (e.g., doctor). This means that computer explosions, problems with your roommate, bad weather, etc. are not sufficient excuses. In fact, you should expect all of these things to occur and submit your paper well in advance of the deadline. Consider this your warning. Also, remember that Blackboard notes exactly when your paper is submitted and, yes, a paper that comes in one minute past the due date is late and will not be graded. I strongly encourage you to submit your answers early to avoid any last minute stress and/or disappointment—there is no shame in submitting your paper well before the deadline.

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 to 5 pages long (double spaced) with normal font (12 point) and standard margins (one inch). 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.2 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 instructions 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 it 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 should also bounce some of your ideas off me during office hours, as I may be able to help you hone your argument. You should also write more than one 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, as 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

2 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 that is untrue (Brown 2008: 456).”
• 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
• The paper 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/or 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/or unconvincing
• Main argument is thinly 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, although you will really have to do high-quality work. I am sure that you agree that an A should actually mean something!