

# POSC 100: CONTEMPORARY U.S. POLITICS

SPRING 2015

Dr. Jack D. Collens

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*Course Time:* 8:00am – 9:00am  
Monday, Wednesday, & Friday  
123 Siena Hall

*Office Hours:* 9:30am–12:30pm  
Tuesday & Thursday  
321C Siena Hall

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The study of government is the study of our daily lives. Politics pervades everything we do, see, hear, and even taste and touch. This course is designed to help students recognize the importance not only of the outcomes of policy makers' decisions, but also the processes that help to create them. By the end of this course, students should be informed consumers of political information. In particular, this class will focus on the underlying logic of American constitutional design, the roles and powers of our political institutions, and the various ways in which voters and citizens connect to their government. This course will also serve as an introduction to political science as a discipline, as students will be exposed to relevant political science research and will be expected to discuss this research in detail. Furthermore, this class will help students gain a better understanding of current issues and debates in American politics through modified Oxford-style debates.

## Texts

The text below is **required** and can be found in the Siena College bookstore or online. Note that it is also available as an eBook or for rental via Amazon or the publisher's website. Both are often cheaper options than purchasing the book. Other required readings can be found on the course Blackboard page or via links in the syllabus.

Lowi, Theodore J., Benjamin Ginsberg, Kenneth A. Shepsle, and Stephen Ansolabehere. 2014. *American Government: Power and Purpose, Thirteenth Core Edition*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. (ISBN: 978-0393922455).

## Learning Goals

This course addresses the following college, school, and departmental learning goals:

### *Siena College Learning Goals*

1. **INFORMED REASONING:** Students will think critically and creatively to make reasoned and informed judgments. Through engagement with contemporary and enduring questions of human concern, students will solve problems in ways that reflect the integration of knowledge across general and specialized studies, and they will demonstrate competence in information literacy and independent research.
2. **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION:** Students will read texts with comprehension and critical involvement, write effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences, speak knowledgeably, and listen with discernment and empathy.
4. **REGARD FOR HUMAN SOLIDARITY AND DIVERSITY:** Students will affirm the unity of the human family, uphold the dignity of individuals, and delight in diversity. They will demonstrate intercultural knowledge and respect.

### *School of Liberal Arts Learning Goals*

1. Apply evaluative thinking skills to investigate the complexities of the human past and its connections to artistic, ethical, sociopolitical, moral, and spiritual dimensions of contemporary life.
3. Utilize effective oral, written, and artistic communication relevant to academic disciplines.
7. Develop a perspective that recognizes diversity within and among cultures.

### *Major/Program Learning Goals*

The Political Science program aims to provide students with:

- A foundation for future careers;
- A solid theoretical, empirical, and methodological foundation for future graduate study;
- A knowledge and awareness, as citizens, of the responsibility that membership within a democratic society entails;
- A sensitivity to the cultural and political diversity within the United States and the world community.

## **Learning Outcomes**

To accomplish these goals, students in this class will:

- ☑ Learn about our Constitution and how political institutions and actors interact to change the course of public policy
- ☑ Hear and contribute a diversity of opinions in a classroom environment which mimics the pluralistic nature of our society
- ☑ Improve their critical thinking, oral communication, and writing skills through carefully designed course discussions, debates, and writing assignments
- ☑ Learn to use the [Chicago style](#) of citation and reference management (author-date style)
- ☑ Become better informed consumers of political information

## **Student Responsibilities & Assessment**

### *Attendance*

Reading is necessary for a successful college experience, but it is far from sufficient. Class attendance is more than mere reinforcement of material you may have read in the assigned readings. As such, students must attend class regularly, take comprehensive notes, ask for clarification when necessary, and participate in discussion. I will draw test questions from the texts, lectures, and discussion material, so you must pay attention. I will take attendance each day and will only forgive two unexcused absences; additional unexcused absences will reduce your attendance grade by 5 points each. Attendance is worth 7.5 percent of the final course grade.

### *Active & Informed Participation*

Attendance is not sufficient to earn a satisfactory participation grade. This course requires *active* and *informed* participation. As such, students are expected to speak up in class and contribute to discussions and debates with relevant points and questions. Note that this approach emphasizes quality of participation over quantity. I will monitor your contributions each week and provide you with a current

participation grade at the midpoint of the semester. This will not affect your final participation grade, but will provide you with an assessment of your current progress in the class, thereby allowing students to adjust their participation accordingly. Participation is worth 7.5 percent of the final course grade and will assess students' critical thinking and oral communication skills.

### *Exams*

You will receive three exams—two midterms and a *non-cumulative* final. These exams will consist of short answer questions and an essay prompt. I shall draw exam questions from lectures, discussions, and the required texts. Be punctual on test days, as you will have no extended time. Makeup exams will differ significantly from the original exam and will only be granted with a valid, college-recognized excuse.

### *Reaction Papers*

Ten percent of your final grade will come from two short reaction papers, due on **March 9** and **May 1**. Specific guidelines for these assignments will be provided in the first few weeks of class. These papers will assess students' critical thinking and writing skills, as well as their abilities to use the Chicago style of citation and reference management. Papers will be due both as hard copies (in class for the March 9 paper, in the folder outside my office door for the May 1 paper) and via Turnitin through Blackboard. The paper topics will be:

1. **Current Events & The Constitution (Due March 9):** For this paper, students will write 3–4 pages on any current event in U.S. politics with constitutional implications. Students must find two relevant articles on the topic/issue from a reputable news site (see me if you are unsure whether your source is reputable), then spend their essay *briefly* summarizing the topic discussed in the article, linking the issue to the U.S. Constitution, and evaluating the issue from a constitutional perspective.
2. **Institutional Reform (Due May 1):** For this paper, students will write 3–4 pages on a proposed reform to any political institution in the U.S. Students may not choose to discuss proposed reforms that we have covered in any class debates. Students will locate sources proposing and opposing the reform, outline the arguments for and against, and defend their own stance on the proposition.

### *Quizzes*

Reading quizzes will constitute 5 percent of students' final grades and will be administered on an as-needed basis. That is, I will only require quizzes on days students seem unprepared. If, after a few minutes of discussion, it becomes obvious that students have not read or prepared for class, I will ask students to put away all materials and take a three-question quiz. At the beginning of the semester, students start with a perfect score of 100 on five quizzes. Each time I offer a quiz, it will replace one of those perfect scores with a (presumably) lower score. At the end of the semester, the resulting quiz grade will reflect the degree to which students came prepared to discuss the readings.

### *Debates*

Twice during the semester, each student will participate in a modified Oxford-style debate. These debates will start with a resolution, with 5–6 students assigned either to support or oppose the resolution. The debates will proceed in three rounds. In the first round, each student will have roughly 5 minutes to present his or her argument (note that teams should prepare in advance which arguments will be advanced by which teammates). In the second round, teams will field questions from the rest of the class and the moderator (me). In the final round, teams will elect one member to present concluding arguments. These debates will be worth 10 percent of your final grade (5 percent each). Students will sign up for debate topics in the first weeks of class, whereupon further details will be provided.

## Grading

A = 93–100; A- = 90–92; B+ = 87–89; B = 83–86; B- = 80–82; C+ = 77–79; C = 73–76; C- = 70–72; D+ = 67–69; D = 63–66; D- = 60–62; F ≤ 59.

Item	Percentage
Exam I	20 percent
Exam II	20 percent
Exam III	20 percent
Reading Quizzes	5 percent
Debates	10 percent
Papers	10 percent
Attendance	7.5 percent
Participation	7.5 percent
TOTAL	100 percent

## Availability

The best way to contact me is via email. Please include the course number and time in your subject line (“POSC 100 – 8am”). If your question requires more than a few sentences to ask, please feel free to visit my office hours. My door is always open. If you have concerns about your grade, I highly recommend that you come to see me as soon as possible. I am available to help you, but it is your responsibility to demonstrate to me that you want to improve your performance. If you cannot meet during office hours, feel free to email me to schedule another time. Note, however, that failure to appear during any meetings scheduled outside of my regular office hours will count against your participation grade.

## Disabilities & Illnesses

Students with disabilities of any kind are strongly encouraged to notify me and the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities at the beginning of the semester, so the appropriate accommodations can be made. Please note that I am willing to work with students who contract illnesses, but it is the student’s responsibility to contact me as soon as they are aware of the illness to plan their coursework for the duration of the illness. I can help you during and immediately after any illnesses, but I cannot help you if you wait until the end of the semester to make up any missed work.

## Academic Honesty

All Siena College policies relating to academic honesty will be upheld in this course. An outline of the college’s Academic Integrity Policy is available at <https://www2.siena.edu/pages/2667.asp>. I require all papers to be submitted both as hard copies and electronically via Turnitin, which will detect *any* use of others’ words. Please note that I have a “zero tolerance” policy towards cheating and plagiarism. It is your responsibility to know what constitutes plagiarism and cheating.

## Assistance

Students requiring assistance with their writing may see me in my office or contact the Siena College [Writing Center](#). As you will not be allowed to rewrite any assignments, I suggest you take advantage of the resources available to help you with your writing before turning in any written assignments.

## Diversity Awareness

Students will treat each other with respect and dignity in my classroom. Failure to do so will be severely punished. Where appropriate, students should be open to other perspectives and experiences. I encourage students to inform me of their preferred gender pronouns as early as possible.

## Laptop Policy

The current generation of college students grew up in the connected age; as such, computers are as much a part of your learning experience as textbooks and pens. However, the [most current research](#) on laptop and tablet use in classrooms suggests that significant majorities of students who use laptops in class spend more than 10 minutes in class on social networking sites and non-course related sites, that these types of activities can distract those around you, and that taking notes by hand is a far more effective strategy than using a laptop. As such, I require that any students who choose to use laptops must sit in the back half of the classroom. Students taking notes by hand may sit in the front half of the classroom, free from the distractions of their neighbors' favorite YouTube clips and cat photos.

A final word on the use of laptops: Most faculty members recognize the tension between wanting to allow laptops (which will help students develop the skills they will need to incorporate technology in their future careers) and wanting to ensure adequate delivery of course material. My policy is somewhat of a compromise. Note, however, that I retain the right to alter this policy and ban laptops from my classroom (exceptions would apply to those with relevant disabilities). My goal in this class is to ensure that you become better-informed consumers of political information and are able to participate in the political process. I will work with you to ensure that you are able to use your laptops effectively to that end and will, from time to time, encourage the use of laptops or even smart phones to retrieve relevant material in class, but students should be careful not to take this as a *carte blanche* to distract themselves and others.

## Class Schedule\*

Date	Topic	Reading
01.12.15	Introduction	Course syllabus
01.14.15	Logic & Principles	LGSA, Ch. 1
01.16.15	State of the Union & <i>The West Wing</i>	Lovett, Bevan, and Baumgartner 2014
01.19.15	<b>NO CLASS—MLK DAY</b>	2015 State of the Union address
01.21.15	Founding	LGSA, pp. 32–42
01.23.15	Founding	Thomas Paine's <i>Common Sense</i>
01.26.15	Constitution	LGSA, pp. 43–70
01.28.15	Constitution	<i>Federalists</i> 10, 51
01.30.15	Federalism	LGSA, Ch. 3
02.02.15	[Stupid #\$\$*ing snow]	[none]
02.04.15	Constitution DEBATE	Excerpts from <i>The Enduring Debate</i>
02.06.15	Federalism	SCOTUSblog on Federalism and Marriage
02.09.15	Federalism DEBATE	Excerpts from <i>Debating Reform</i>
02.11.15	Congress	LGSA, Ch. 6
02.13.15	Congress (Redistricting)	McCarty (2012), Carson, et al. (2014)
02.16.15	Congress DEBATE	Excerpts from <i>Debating Reform</i>
02.18.15	Catch-Up & Review	[none]
02.20.15	<b>EXAM I</b>	[none]
*****	<b>SPRING BREAK</b>	*****
03.02.15	Presidency	LGSA, Ch. 7
03.04.15	Presidency	Moe and Howell (1999)
03.06.15	Presidency DEBATE	Excerpts from <i>Debating Reform</i>
03.09.15	Judiciary ( <b>Paper 1 Due</b> )	LGSA, Ch. 9
03.11.15	Judiciary	Zeisberg 2009
03.13.15	Judiciary DEBATE	Excerpts from <i>The Enduring Debate</i>
03.16.15	Civil Rights	LGSA, Ch. 5
03.18.15	Civil Liberties	LGSA, Ch. 4
03.20.15	Civil Liberties DEBATE	<i>Intelligence<sup>2</sup> U.S. Debate</i>
03.23.15	Public Opinion/Media	LGSA, Ch. 10
03.25.15	Public Opinion/Media	Levendusky (2014), Arceneaux (2014)
03.27.15	Public Opinion/Media DEBATE	Excerpts from <i>The Enduring Debate</i>
03.30.15	<b>EXAM II</b>	[none]
04.01.15	Interest Groups	LGSA, Ch. 13
*****	<b>EASTER BREAK</b>	*****
04.08.15	Interest Groups	Excerpts from Schattschneider (1960)
04.10.15	Political Parties	LGSA, Ch. 12
04.13.15	Political Parties	Excerpts from Skocpol & Williamson (2012)
04.15.15	Political Parties DEBATE	<i>Intelligence<sup>2</sup> U.S. Debate</i>
04.17.15	<b>NO CLASS—OUT OF TOWN</b>	[none]
04.20.15	Voting & Elections	LGSA, Ch. 11
04.22.15	Voting & Elections	Lawless and Fox (2013)
04.24.15	Voting & Elections DEBATE	<i>Intelligence<sup>2</sup> U.S. Debate</i>
04.27.15	<b>EXAM III</b>	[none]
05.01.15	<b>Paper 2 Due</b>	[none]

Legend: LGSA = *American Government: Power and Purpose, Thirteenth Core Edition*, by Lowi, Ginsberg, Shepsle, and Ansolabehere

\*I reserve the right to alter the class schedule as I see fit.