

POSC 351W – Topics in American Politics: The Current Crisis in American Party Politics

James Madison University Washington Center
1400 16th Street, NW, Suite 320
Tuesday, 6:45-9:15 PM

Fall 2018

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1 Overview & goals

Recent years have been hard on the two-party system. More than 40 percent of Americans now identify as “independent.” Thirteen percent of those who do identify with either party have changed their affiliation in the past five years – a rate of party switching not seen since the turn of the 20th century. Meanwhile, leaders in both parties face sustained insurgency. On the right, Donald J. Trump has captured the White House. On the left, Hillary Clinton nearly lost nomination to Sen. Bernard Sanders, a self-described Socialist. These battles continue to play out in the media, primary contests, and a heightened debate over whether to reform American elections. Finally, many smart people have asked if our democracy is in danger.

This course will equip you to think with sophistication about the current crisis in American party politics. We will analyze it from the detached perspective of political science. We will analyze it in view of the global “populist moment.” And we will be critical of what is in the news.

Coalition maintenance will be a central theme in this course. We want to learn about the challenges politicians face as they try to keep together an *electoral majority*. We will explore those challenges through class discussion, writing assignments, and a simulation.

By the end of the course, you will be able to better navigate our politics’ uncertain future. You will be able to distinguish extreme claims from sensible ones. You will better understand what is at stake in these debates. Finally, you will know where to start if you end up wanting more on some topic.

2 Things to buy

Please buy these two books from your favorite store. The smartphone app can be purchased as usual.

- Aldrich, John. 2011. *Why Parties? A Second Look*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mudde, Cas and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

- iClicker for your smartphone (called “iClicker Reef” for Apple and “REEF Polling” for Android).

3 Requirements

Your grade will be based on the following components:

1. Reading and participation (15%).
2. Effort in the simulation (15%).
3. Shorter paper (30%) – due November 6.
4. Longer paper (40%) – due on exam date.

3.1 Reading and participation

Participation is based on your attendance, engagement, and reading comprehension. I will pop quizzes to ensure you do the reading. These will be by iClicker. Assume there will be one at the start of each class. We also may do in-class activities such as writing short reflections, having small-group discussions, and reporting on their results. All readings can be found on Canvas, in the “Files” section, unless a hyperlink appears in this syllabus.

3.2 The papers

The shorter paper is due in class on November 6. Your final paper is due on the course exam date.

Papers will be based on responses to prompts. You should not need to consult readings that I have not assigned. I will hand out the prompts in class, well in advance of any paper’s due date. Specifics remain to be determined, but the target length of the long paper will not exceed 3,000 words (i.e., about 12 double-spaced pages with one-inch margins and 12-point font).

The short paper exists to help you think, not just to increase the number of data points that go into your grade. One reason for the short paper is to warm you up to write the longer one. Another is to have you work through ideas in written sentences. This sharpens what we learn from taking notes and talking.

The longer paper assignment will ask you to reflect on the readings, lectures, and course experience as a whole. Prompts will be focused, but many concepts will be useful in coming up with answers.

3.3 The simulation

Our simulation will reinforce concepts learned in class. I will divide you arbitrarily into groups, and those groups will need to organize a legislature. Your goal will be to maximize points, convertible into some tangible reward. Points will result from “bills” you pass in your legislative sessions. We will hold legislative sessions both in class and online. I will explain the rules in depth on the first day of class. Effort in the simulation is one part of your grade.

4 Other policies

You agree to:

1. Check JMU email daily, morning and evening, from August 26 through the final-exam date.
2. Attend class and meet course deadlines *except in documented cases of bereavement, severe illness, or medical emergency*. You must provide a doctor's note or funeral announcement if you cannot meet a deadline and/or attend a class meeting.
3. Turn in written work on time. Put a hard copy in my hands, and send me the digital version via e-mail. Five points are deducted if an assignment is late. Five more points are deducted for each 24-hour period past the time and date an assignment is due. Non-business and holiday hours count toward these 24-hour periods. Business hours are 9 AM to 5:30 PM, Monday through Friday, non-holiday.
4. Access the JMU library website to download a given reading, if necessary.
5. Abide by all other JMU policies, including but not limited to those regarding plagiarism. I reserve the right to use plagiarism-detection software.

I agree to:

1. Abide by any grading guidelines in this syllabus, simulation rules, and writing-assignment instructions. Grading is on the 0-100 scale: 93 and up (A), 90-92 (A-), 87-89 (B+), 83-87 (B), 80-82 (B-), and so on, down to 50 (F).
2. Answer student e-mail within 48 business hours. Business hours are 9 AM to 5:30 PM, Monday through Friday, non-holiday.
3. Except for the two required books, post links to readings on JMU Canvas, if not the readings themselves.
4. Grade written work within 10 business days of its submission.

5 Schedule of readings & classes

August 28

1. Read this syllabus.

5.1 How should we think about political parties?

September 4

1. Bawn, Kathleen and coauthors. "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 3 (2012): 571-597.
2. Aldrich (2011), pp. 27-30.

September 11

1. Sartori, Giovanni. "The Numerical Criterion." In *Parties and Party Systems (Vol. 1): A Framework For Analysis*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
2. Aldrich (2011), pp. 56-60.

5.2 What does it mean to say that things are "polarized"?

September 18

1. Noel, Hans. "Ideological Parties and Polarization" (excerpt). In *Political Parties and Political Ideologies in America*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
2. Lee, Frances E. "Patronage, Logrolls, and 'Polarization': Congressional Parties of the Gilded Age, 1876-1896." *Studies in American Political Development* 30, no. 2 (2016): 116-127.

5.3 What happened to the parties in 2016?

September 25

1. Noel, Hans. "What We Learn From Unusual Cases: A Review of Azari and Gelman's '19 Things We Learned From the 2016 Election.'" *Statistics and Public Policy* 4, no. 1 (2017): 1-3.
2. Dyck, Joshua J., Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz, and Michael Coates. "Primary Distrust: Political Distrust and Support for the Insurgent Candidacies of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Primary." *PS* 51, no. 2 (2018): 351-357.
3. Azari, Julia and Mark J. Hetherington. "Back to the Future? What the Politics of the Late Nineteenth Century Can Tell Us about the 2016 Election." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667, no. 1 (2016): 92-109.

5.4 Why do people leave their parties?

October 2

1. Griffin, Robert. *Party Hoppers: Understanding Voters Who Switched Partisan Affiliation* (white paper). Washington, DC: Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, 2017.
2. Spahn, Bradley. "Before the American Voter." Typescript, 2018.

October 9

1. Tamas, Bernard I. "Unraveling the Conundrum of Third-Party Decline" and "The Decline and Rise of Political Polarization." In *The Demise and Rebirth of American Third Parties: Poised for Political Revival?*, New York: Routledge, 2018.

5.5 What is populism, and is it good or bad?

October 16

1. Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

October 23

1. Aldrich (2011), chs. 4 on “Jacksonian Democracy” and 5 on “Whigs and Republicans.”
2. Rydgren, Jens and Sara van der Meiden. “The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism.” *European Political Science*, early online version (2018): 1-17.

5.6 Is democracy in danger?

October 30

1. Levitsky, Steven and Daniel Ziblatt. “How a Democracy Dies.” *The New Republic* (January 2018).
2. Lepsius, M. Rainer. “From Fragmented Party Democracy to Government by Emergency Decree and National Socialist Takeover: Germany.” In *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Europe*, edited by Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

November 6

1. Drutman, Lee, Larry Diamond, and Joe Goldman. *Follow the Leader: Exploring American Support for Democracy and Authoritarianism* (white paper). Washington, DC: Democracy Fund Voter Study Group.
2. Davis, Nicholas T. “When Government Fails.” *Jacobin* (February 22, 2018). Online: <http://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/02/public-opinion-democracy-authoritarianism-populism-trump>.
3. Short paper is due.

5.7 Should we reform elections?

November 13

1. Aldrich (2011), ch. 9 on “Political Parties, Historical Dynamics, and Democratic Politics.”
2. Lowi, Theodore J. “Toward a More Responsible Three-Party System: The Mythology of the Two-Party System and the Prospects for Reform.” *PS* 16, no. 4 (1983), 699-706.

November 27

1. Drutman, Lee. "The Case for Proportional Voting." *National Affairs* (Winter 2018).
2. Santucci, Jack. "Maine's election shows that ranked-choice voting is hot right now. But we have been here before." *LSE's USAPP* (June 15, 2018). Online:
<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2018/06/15/maines-election-shows-that-ranked-choice-voting-is-hot-right-now-but-we-have-been-here-before/>.

5.8 Is there a crisis? Simulation recap and discussion of final papers.

December 4

1. No readings.