

# **POL 101: American Politics**

Associate Professor Vincent Vecera

Randolph College

Online Course

Synchronous meeting hour to be determined

Office Hours are Tuesdays from 1 to 4pm and Fridays from 9 to 11am

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## *Course Outline and Policies*

This is an introductory online course in American politics. Our primary focus will be the political institutions of the United States, which we'll explain through a combination of historical institutional development and the analysis of economic and social interests. We will aim to ask how the rules and norms of institutions shape political behavior and meaning and seek to explain those rules and norms in historical terms.

We will read two books in their near-entirety. One, *The Logic of American Politics*, is a very good introductory textbook. American politics is a vast subfield of political science that draws on lessons from a remarkable variety of problems and approaches to solving them. The course is also intended to serve as a loose introduction to some important ideas in social science, particularly political science. We'll cover rational choice theory, historical and institutional analysis, experiments, survey research and data analysis, and some important ideas and controversies in the history of American political thought. In lectures I will put a particular emphasis on research on the various topics we study, sharing with you not only interesting and important findings but also the variety of methods used to produce those findings.

**Online.** This course is delivered entirely online. Much of the work can, as with any traditional course, be done at your own schedule, however we will have a dedicated weekly discussion for which we must all be present. If for any reason it becomes impossible for you to be at the discussion, please let me know via email. We will use Google Meet for these meetings. You are expected to have a video/audio capability for this (any modern smartphone will do) but if this is a problem for you for any reason, please get in touch with me so we can talk about it.

The class consists of 27 "days," 2 of which are dedicated to exams and the other 25 of which consist of coursework. Twenty days include a recorded lecture and a reading. You're expected to do the reading and watch the lecture. You are expected to post two questions on the classroom site each calendar week except the last, for a total of ten questions, and to post at least one response to a fellow student each week, for a total of five responses. Five of the days are dedicated to discussion. Each discussion will last 80 minutes. In discussion I'll review the key concepts from that week's topics, answer questions, and aim to guide a discussion focused on the interests of those in the class. I will ask your opinions about certain aspects of some topics we discuss and expect you to be respectful and tolerant in this class of the range of reasonable

disagreement that characterizes life in the United States. If you are unable to attend discussion, we must schedule a (shorter) alternative time to talk or agree upon another alternative assignment.

I hold office hours online every Tuesday from 1 to 4pm, and Friday from 9 to 11am, but can easily schedule another time to talk. I will make myself available via video on Google Duo at this time. You can always contact me via my Randolph College email address. I can also field questions not about content via email, but prefer to discuss content issues via video.

**Honor.** Since 1891, the students of the college have adopted an honor code. You must maintain its sanctity for future generations. It reads: “I pledge absolute honesty in my academic work and in all personal relationships at Randolph College. I will maintain the integrity of my word, and I will respect the rights of others. Realizing that these standards are an integral part of life at Randolph College, I assume my obligation to uphold this honor pledge. If at any time I fail to live up to my obligation of this pledge, I will report myself to the Chair of the Judiciary Committee. I will also ask others to report themselves for any infraction of this pledge.”

**Accommodations.** Randolph College is committed to providing learning experiences that are accessible for all students, and will make reasonable accommodations for individuals with documented disabilities. If you have a learning difference or a disability—mental health, medical, or physical impairment—please contact Diane Roy, Coordinator of Disability Services, in the Academic Services Center, 4th floor, Lipscomb Library; at (434) 947-8132; or at [droy@randolphcollege.edu](mailto:droy@randolphcollege.edu).

**Title IX statement.** Your instructors have a responsibility to help create a safe learning environment. They also have a mandatory reporting responsibility. Your instructor wants you to feel able to share information related to your life experiences in classroom discussions, in your written work, and in one-on-one meetings, but keep in mind that instructors are required to share information regarding sexual misconduct or information about a crime that may have occurred on Randolphs campus with the Colleges Title IX Coordinator, Sharon Saunders. The Health Center and Counseling Center staff and college chaplain *are not* mandated reporters. As such they are not required to share information about sexual misconduct with the college and will keep your information private and confidential.

**Grading.** Your grade in this course will be determined by two papers, two exams, and participation in class through video meetings and discussion questions and responses.

- 20% Participation (message board and video meet)
- 20% Paper on a collective action problem
- 20% Paper on constitutional reform
- 20% First exam
- 20% Second exam

The two books are *The Logic of American Politics*, by Kernell, Jacobson, Kousser, and Vavreck (the current edition is the 8th but the 7th will do fine too) and *How Democratic is the American Constitution* by Dahl.

### *Course Schedule*

*Day 1.* Rational choice theory. Logic, c. 1.

*Day 2.* Collective problems and Colonial America. Logic, c. 1 (continued).

*Day 3.* The U.S. Constitution. Logic, c. 2.

*Day 4.* Federalism and separation of powers. Logic, c. 3.

*Day 5.* Civil rights and liberties. Logic, c. 4 and 5.

*Day 6.* Discussion via Google Meet. Come prepared with questions and comments inspired by the course message board. We will do an in-class activity.

**Paper on a collective action problem due.**

*Day 7.* Congress (institutional development). Logic, c. 6.

*Day 8.* Congress (lawmaking process). Logic, c. 6.

*Day 9.* The presidency. Logic, c. 7.

*Day 10.* The bureaucracy. Logic, c. 8.

*Day 11.* The judicial systems. Logic, c. 9.

*Day 12.* Negotiation within and between branches. Negotiation reading will not exceed 6,000 words and will be posted a few days in advance.

*Day 13.* Discussion via Google Meet. Come prepared as before and anticipate an in-class activity.

*Day 14.* **First exam.**

*Day 15.* Public opinion (conceptual structure, democracy and legitimacy). Logic, c. 10.

*Day 16.* Public opinion (measurement issues). Logic, c. 10, continued. Optional: Carney et al., available on the course website.

*Day 17.* Discussion via Google Meet. Come prepared with questions.

*Day 18.* Elections and voting, the news media. Logic, c. 11 and 14. Deus ex Machina reading.

*Day 19.* The party system. Logic, c. 12.

*Day 20.* Interest groups and the policy process. Logic, c. 13.

*Day 21.* Discussion via Google Meet. Come prepared with questions.

*Day 22.* **Second exam.**

*Day 23.* The Framers' position. Dahl, c. 1 and 2.

*Day 24.* Other vantages, the executive. Dahl, c. 3 and 4.

*Day 25.* Assessing the constitution. Dahl, c. 5 and 6.

*Day 26.* Aspirations to constitutional reform. Dahl, c. 7 and 8.

*Day 27.* Discussion via Google Meet. Come prepared to discuss Dahl. **Paper on constitutional reform due.**