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# POLISCI 104: Introduction to American Politics and Government

Spring 2026

Last Updated: January 05, 2026

Note: All times and dates in the syllabus or other course material correspond to Madison's Central Time Zone

## Class information

**Class Time:** TuTh 11:00AM - 12:15PM

**Class Location:** BASCOM 272

**Course Canvas URL:** <https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495196>  
(<https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495196>)

**Number of Credits:** 4

**Course Designation & Attributes:**

Breadth: Social Science

Level: Elementary

L&S Credit: Counts as Liberal Arts and Science credit in L&S

**Instructional mode:** In-Person

**Requisites:** Not open to students who have taken POLI SCI 184 or POLI SCI 404

## Instructor information

**Instructor:** Professor Matthew Pietryka

**Preferred Name:** *Professor Pietryka* or just *Prof. P*

**Pronouns:** he/him

**Email:** [mpietryka@wisc.edu](mailto:mpietryka@wisc.edu) (<mailto:mpietryka@wisc.edu>)

**Office:** North Hall 302

**Prof. Pietryka's Student Hours:** I will be available to meet in person after most class meetings (for quick conversations) and in my office Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9-10AM (for longer conversations). Drop ins are welcome during these times, but you can also reduce waiting by reserving a student hour meeting time slot using this link:

<https://calendly.com/pietryka/office-hours> (<https://calendly.com/pietryka/office-hours>)

## Teaching Assistant (TA) information

**Teaching Assistants:**

Natalie Jones ( [n1jones3@wisc.edu](mailto:n1jones3@wisc.edu) (<mailto:n1jones3@wisc.edu>))

Matthias Lopez ( [matthias.lopez@wisc.edu](mailto:matthias.lopez@wisc.edu) (<mailto:matthias.lopez@wisc.edu>))

Cody-Ann Lyn ( [lyn@wisc.edu](mailto:lyn@wisc.edu) (<mailto:lyn@wisc.edu>))

Emily Matthews ( [emily.matthews@wisc.edu](mailto:emily.matthews@wisc.edu) (<mailto:emily.matthews@wisc.edu>))

**TA Student Hours:** see section syllabi.

## 1 Course Description

Basic institutions and processes of American government. The role of constitutional structures, parties, interest groups and elections in the system; policy formation and policy content.

## Course Overview

This course is an introduction to American politics and government. By the end of the semester you should have a good understanding of how the government makes policy and why decisions are made as they are. The course will combine accounts of how "Washington really works" from the popular media, scholarly work on the governmental process, and debates on various political issues and institutions. This is an especially exciting time to be taking a class on American politics, with the midterm elections, dealing with inflation and a possible

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recession, racial justice, continuing debates over Social Security and Medicare, energy and climate change, immigration, gun control, budget deficits, and growing concerns about polarization and gridlock in Washington.

The course begins with a discussion of the foundations of our governmental system: the Constitution, federalism, capitalism and questions concerning the democratic nature of our government. Then we will examine the American political institutions: Congress, the president, the bureaucracy, and the courts. From there we turn to political participation and examine public opinion, parties, campaigns and elections, the media, and interest groups. Finally, we will see how it all fits together by examining civil rights, social policy, economic policy, and foreign policy. While the course is a lecture class (intimate discussions are a little difficult with 400 students), I encourage you to raise questions you have about anything presented in the lectures. The weekly discussion sections also provide an opportunity to examine critically the course material.

## Course Learning Outcomes

The goals of this class are both theoretical and practical: I aim to give you a theoretical basis for understanding American politics and a greater awareness of the events to which theory can be applied. I also hope to provide you the tools you need to evaluate the political system and engage you in national politics. With that in mind, the course has four learning outcomes:

1. Familiarize students with American political institutions.
2. Prepare students to take upper-level classes in American politics.
3. Get students interested in American politics.
4. Analyze issues and policies in U.S. politics.

**How Credit Hours are Met by the Course:** This is a 4-credit course that meets each week for two 75-minute lectures and a 50-minute discussion section. The course also carries the expectation that students will work on course learning activities for about two hours out of classroom for each credit hour (that is, eight additional hours a week). If you find yourself spending significantly more than 8 hours on out-of-class preparation each week, reach out to your TA or Prof. Pietryka during office hours. We're happy to talk about different reading and study strategies that might help.

**Regular and Substantive Student-Instructor Interaction:** Three meetings per week with direct instruction (two lectures and one section meeting), facilitating discussion of course content, and providing feedback on student work.

## Required Textbook, Software, and other Course materials

William T. Bianco and David T. Canon, *American Politics Today: Election Update*. 8th full edition, W.W. Norton, 2025 (make sure to get the full edition; do not get either the brief ("core") edition, or the "essentials" edition).

David T. Canon, John J. Coleman, Kenneth R. Mayer, eds. *The Enduring Debate: Classic and Contemporary Readings in American Politics*, 9th ed., W.W. Norton, 2022

Also, I urge you to read a good national newspaper, such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, or the *Washington Post*.

## 2 Grades

Grading in this class is designed to reflect how well students have achieved the course learning outcomes. Specifically, this will be accomplished through the different components detailed in the table below. Final Grades are not curved.

The final grade is calculated using the following weights:

Assignment	Description	Weight (Percentage of Grade)
Discussion Section Grade	Based on attendance and participation during your discussion section	10%
Reading Quizzes	Publisher-provided Reading Quizzes	10%

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Assignment	Description	Weight (Percentage of Grade)
Midterm Exam I	In-class exam on the material covered so far	25%
Midterm Exam II	In-class exam on the material covered since Midterm 1	25%
Final Exam	In-class exam on the material covered throughout the semester	30%
<b>Total</b>		<b>100%</b>

The exams will rely on a mix of multiple choice, short answer, and short essays.

## Final Grades

At the end of the semester, the final letter grade will be assigned according to the standard table:

Grade	Grading Cutoff (%)
A (Excellent)	93
AB (Intermediate Grade)	88
B (Good)	83
BC (Intermediate Grade)	77
C (Fair)	70
D (Poor)	65
F (Failure)	NA

## 3 Schedule

Note: The schedule is tentative and is likely to change as the semester progresses.

Day	Date	Topic	Read
Tue	01/20	Introduction to the Course	APT Preface APT ch1 TED: Michael Schudson, "The Good Citizen"
Thur	01/22	The Constitution I	APT ch2 TED: The Constitution and its Amendments Canvas: Federalist Papers #10 and #51 TED: Michael Kammen, "The Nature of American Constitutionalism"
Tue	01/27	The Constitution II	TED: Charles Beard, "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution" TED: Levinson, Abbot, and Olson, "Should the Constitution be Fundamentally Changed?"
Thur	01/29	Federalism	APT ch3 TED: Paul Peterson, "The Price of Federalism" TED: George Annas, "Jumping Frogs... and Medical Marijuana" TED: The Economist et al., "Immigration Reform: More Power to the States?"
Tue	02/03	Civil Liberties I	APT ch4
Thur	02/05	Civil Liberties II	TED: Jonathan Rauch, "In Defense of Prejudice" TED: Cole and Helfman, "Should There be a Religious Exemption to Nondiscrimination Law?"

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Tue	02/10	Campaigns and Elections I	APT ch9
Thur	02/12	Campaigns and Elections II	TED: V.O. Key, "The Voice of the People: An Echo" TED: Louis Menand, "The Unpolitical Animal" TED: William Galston, "Telling Americans to Vote, Or Else" TED: Fund et al., "Reducing Fraud or Suppressing Voters?"
Tue	02/17	Public Opinion	APT ch6 George Gallup, TED: "Polling the Public" TED: Richard Morin, "Choice of Words"
Thur	02/19	The Media	APT ch7 TED: Markus Prior, "News vs. Entertainment" TED: Sides, Jolly, and Levendusky, "Is Partisan Media Exposure Bad...?"
Tue	02/24	Midterm Exam 1	
Thur	02/26	Political Parties	APT ch8 TED: Morris Fiorina, "The Decline of Collective Responsibility" TED: Nicol Rae, "Be Careful What You Wish For" TED: Diamond and Klein, "Should the US Encourage Multi-party Politics?"
Tue	03/03	Interest Groups	APT ch10 Alexis de Tocqueville, TED: "Political Association in the US" TED: David Truman, "The Alleged Mischiefs of Faction" TED: Mancur Olson, "The Logic of Collective Action" TED: Campaign Legal Center and Riches, "Donor Disclosure"
Thur	03/05	Congress I	APT ch11
Tue	03/10	Congress II	TED: David Mayhew, "Congress: The Electoral Connection" TED: Richard Fenno, "U.S. House Members in Their Constituencies" TED: Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, "Too Much of a Good Thing" TED: Appelbaum & Spaulding, "Check and Balances"
Thur	03/12	The Presidency I	APT ch12
Tue	03/17	The Presidency II	TED: Richard Neustadt, "The Power to Persuade" TED: Charles O. Jones, "Perspectives on the Presidency" TED: Nichols et al., "Should the Electoral College be Replaced...?"
Thur	03/19	The Courts	APT ch14 TED: Alexander Hamilton, Federalist 78 TED: David O'Brien, "The Court in American Life" TED: Gerald Rosenberg, "The Hollow Hope" TED: Scalia & Breyer, "Interpreting the Constitution"
Tue	03/24	The Bureaucracy	APT ch13 TED: James Q. Wilson, "What Government Agencies Do" TED: Edwards and Wedel, "Should Government Functions be Outsourced?"
Thur	03/26	Midterm Exam 2	

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Day	Date	Topic	Read
Tue	03/31	Spring Break (No class)	
Thur	04/02	Spring Break (No class)	
Tue	04/07	Civil Rights I	APT ch5
Thur	04/09	Civil Rights II	TED: Rogers M. Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville..." TED: Barack Obama, "Remarks... at the 50th Anniversary of Selma" Canvas: Abraham Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" Canvas: MLK Jr., "Letter From the Birmingham Jail" TED: Warshawsky et al., "What Does it Mean to be American?"
Tue	04/14	Economic Policy I	APT ch15
Thur	04/16	Economic Policy II	TED: Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Call for Federal Responsibility" TED: Herbert Hoover, "Against the Proposed New Deal" TED: Jon Gertner, "The Rise and Fall of the GDP" TED: Williams et al., "Is Income Inequality a Problem?"
Tue	04/21	Social Policy I	APT ch16
Thur	04/23	Social Policy II	TED: David John, "Providing Social Security Benefits in the Future" TED: Theodore J. Lowi, "American Business, Public Policy..." TED: Obama and Haislmaier et al., "Should the Affordable Care Act be Repealed?"
Tue	04/28	Foreign Policy	APT ch17 TED: George Soros, "The Age of Open Society" TED: Ronald Bailey, "Globalization is Good For You" TED: Olsen and Pillar, "How Dangerous is ISIS?"
Thur	04/30	Conclusions	
Wed	05/06	Final Exam, 12:25PM-2:25PM	

KEY:

APT = American Politics Today (Eighth Edition)

TED = The Enduring Debate (Ninth Edition)

Canvas = posted to Canvas

## 4 Course Policies

### How to ask questions and get help

We encourage you to reach out if you have questions, ideas, or suggestions you'd like to share about the course. The TAs and I will strive to respond to all inquiries within 24 business hours as long as you follow these instructions:

- **Most questions** about the syllabus, assignments, and course material **should be posted to the course Q&A discussion thread** ([https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495196/discussion\\_topics/2224105](https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/495196/discussion_topics/2224105)) (Canvas -> Course Information -> Course Questions and Answers (Q&A)).
  - Before posting a question, please double-check that the question is not fully answered in a previous discussion thread or on the syllabus.
- **For short questions of a personal nature** (e.g., specifics about your own grade), please email your TA or Prof. P using your UW email account. When emailing Prof. P,

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please include your section time and TA's name (this info makes it easier to find relevant resources in a big class).

- **For questions that require a response of more than a few sentences** (e.g., help working through a problem set), seek help in your TA's student hours or Prof. P's student hours.
- **Follow up if we missed your question:** We strive to respond to all questions within 24 business hours. We're also imperfect humans, and occasionally things get lost in the shuffle. If you have not received a response within 24 business hours, we encourage you to follow up to ensure we did not miss it.

## How we will communicate with you

- When contacting individual students, we will reach out via Canvas Inbox or their UW email.
- When contacting all students, we will use the Announcements feature of the course Canvas.
- To ensure you do not miss an announcement, you can receive email alerts or push notifications each time announcements are posted. To do so, you must configure your Canvas notification settings (<https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Student-Guide/How-do-I-manage-notifications-for-a-single-course-as-a-student/ta-p/430>).

## Student Responsibilities

- You are expected to keep up with the class, engage with the course material, and submit assignments by the due dates.
- Please log on to Canvas at least every other day to check for course updates.
- All work that you submit must be your own, per the UW Academic Misconduct Policy (<https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>).
- To receive credit on submitted work, you must follow the instructions carefully, follow word limits as instructed, and use correct spelling and grammar.
- Please respond to my email or Canvas messages within 24 hours, not counting holidays or weekends.
- Please use your UW email address for all course-related emails.
- When communicating with your fellow classmates, the TAs, or Prof. P, please be respectful and use professional email etiquette (<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/advice-for-students-writing-a-professional-email/>)

## Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools and applications (including, but not limited to Chatgpt, Copilot, Claude, and Gemini) for course assignments and assessments does not support the learning objectives of this course and is prohibited. Using them in submitted work is a violation of the course's expectations and will be addressed through UW–Madison's academic misconduct policy, specifically UWS 14.03(1)(b) Uses unauthorized materials or fabricated data in any academic exercise.

Though AI is not allowed for submitted work, it can be an effective study tool. The key is to use AI as a means to organize your thoughts and better understand the course concepts rather than a tool to avoid engaging with the course material.

If you are uncertain about appropriate use of AI in this course, please reach out to your TA or Prof. Pietryka **prior to submitting any relevant work**.

## 5 University Policies

### Academic Calendar & Religious Observances

View the full academic calendar (<https://secfac.wisc.edu/academic-calendar>) in addition to information about religious and election day observances. Students are responsible for notifying instructors within the first two weeks of classes about any need for flexibility due to religious observances (<https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-880>).

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Establishment of the academic calendar for the University of Wisconsin–Madison falls within the authority of the faculty as set forth in Faculty Policies and Procedures ([https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-801#Pol801\\_1\\_20](https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-801#Pol801_1_20)). Construction of the academic calendar is subject to various rules and laws prescribed by the Board of Regents, the Faculty Senate, State of Wisconsin and the federal government. Find additional dates and deadlines for students (<https://registrar.wisc.edu/dates/>) on the Office of the Registrar website.

## Academic Integrity

By virtue of enrollment, each student agrees to uphold the high academic standards of the University of Wisconsin–Madison; academic misconduct is behavior that negatively impacts the integrity of the institution. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration and helping others commit these previously listed acts are examples of misconduct which may result in disciplinary action. Examples of disciplinary sanctions (<https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>) include, but are not limited to, failure on the assignment/course, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, suspension or expulsion.

## Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

The University of Wisconsin–Madison supports the right of all enrolled students to a full and equal educational opportunity. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Wisconsin State Statute (36.12) and UW–Madison policy (UW-855) (<https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-855>) require the university to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities to access and participate in its academic programs and educational services. Faculty and students share responsibility in the accommodation process. Students are expected to inform faculty of their need for instructional accommodations during the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible after being approved for accommodations. Faculty will work either directly with the student or in coordination with the McBurney Disability Resource Center (<https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>) to provide reasonable instructional and course-related accommodations. Disability information, including instructional accommodations as part of a student's educational record, is confidential and protected under FERPA.

## Course Evaluations

Students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison have the opportunity to evaluate their learning experiences and the courses they are enrolled in through course evaluations. Many instructors use a digital course evaluation tool (<https://kb.wisc.edu/luwmad/81069>) to collect feedback from students. Students typically receive notifications two weeks prior to the end of the semester requesting that they complete course evaluations. Student participation is an integral component of course development, and confidential feedback is important. UW–Madison strongly encourages student participation in course evaluations.

## Diversity & Inclusion

Diversity is a source of strength, creativity, and innovation for the University of Wisconsin–Madison. We value the contributions of each person and respect the profound ways their identity, culture, background, experience, status, abilities, and opinion enrich the university community. We commit ourselves to the pursuit of excellence in teaching, research, outreach, and diversity as inextricably linked goals. UW–Madison fulfills its public mission by creating a welcoming and inclusive community for people from every background – people who as students, faculty, and staff serve Wisconsin and the world. (Source: Institutional Statement on Diversity (<https://diversity.wisc.edu/institutional-statement-on-diversity/>))

## Mental Health & Well-Being

Students often experience stressors that can impact both their academic experience and personal well-being. These may include mental health concerns, substance misuse, sexual or relationship violence, family circumstances, campus climate, financial matters, among others.

UW–Madison students are encouraged to learn about and utilize the university's mental health services and/or other resources as needed. Student can visit [uhs.wisc.edu](https://uhs.wisc.edu) (<https://www.uhs.wisc.edu/>) or call University Health Services at (608) 265-5600 to learn more.

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# Privacy of Student Records & Use of Audio Recorded Lectures

Lecture materials and recordings for this course are protected intellectual property at UW–Madison. Students enrolled in this course may use the materials and recordings for their personal use related to participation in the course. Students may also take notes solely for their personal use. If a lecture is not already recorded, students are not authorized to record lectures without permission unless they are considered by the university to be a qualified student with a disability who has an approved accommodation that includes recording. [Regent Policy Document 4-1] Students may not copy or have lecture materials and recordings outside of class, including posting on internet sites or selling to commercial entities, with the exception of sharing copies of personal notes as a notetaker through the McBurney Disability Resource Center. Students are otherwise prohibited from providing or selling their personal notes to anyone else or being paid for taking notes by any person or commercial firm without the instructor’s express written permission. Unauthorized use of these copyrighted lecture materials and recordings constitutes copyright infringement and may be addressed under the university’s policies, UWS Chapters 14 and 17, governing student academic and non-academic misconduct. View more information about FERPA (<https://registrar.wisc.edu/ferpa-facstaff/>).

## Students’ Rules, Rights & Responsibilities

View more information about student rules, rights and responsibilities (<https://guide.wisc.edu/undergraduate/#rulesrightsandresponsibilitiestext>) such as student privacy rights, sharing of academic record information, academic integrity and grievances.

## Teaching & Learning Data Transparency

The privacy and security of faculty, staff and students’ personal information is a top priority for UW–Madison. The university carefully reviews and vets all campus-supported digital tools used for teaching and learning, including those that support data empowered educational practices (<https://teachlearn.wisc.edu/deep/>) and proctoring. View more information about teaching and learning data transparency (<https://teachlearn.provost.wisc.edu/teaching-and-learning-data-transparency-statement/>) at UW–Madison.

## 6 Syllabus Changes

*(This section will include a running list of any revisions made to the the syllabus throughout the semester)*

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