

Political Science 232

Public Issues in America

Fall 2016

Class time: MWF, 10:30 AM to 11:20 AM
Location: Hamilton Hall (HAH) room 133
Instructor: Jonathan Andrew Jackson
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Office hours: MWRF 11:30-12:30 or by appointment
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Introduction

America is experiencing deep divisions on a variety of issues. That division is perhaps personified by the major party candidates for the presidency, two of the most divisive and least popular candidates either party has nominated in several decades. Whoever wins in November will face acrimonious opposition from a sizable portion of the public and perhaps a Congress controlled by the opposite party. That president will try move on important policy issues.

This class is designed to give students a deeper understanding of contentious issues with which our political system deals (including, as listed in the course description: government spending; civil rights; welfare and health care; poverty; education; urban problems; crime, violence and repression; defense policy; agricultural policy; environment/energy policy). Given that there will be a presidential election during this semester, special emphasis will be given to issues in our electoral politics.

A note on two terms that appear in several places in this syllabus. A **major topic** is one that will be covered over the course of two days, the first day being a lecture and the second day being a semi-formal debate followed by further discussion on the topic. A **minor topic** is one that will be cover over the course of a single class of lecture and discussion. Both types of topics are “testable” but the quizzes will disproportionately come from the major topics.

There will be no textbook for this course. Instead, every student is expected to read 5-8 articles per major topic in class and 2-4 articles per minor topic. Students will also be given the opportunity to help choose one minor topic and two major topics that we will cover later in the semester.

Students will be divided into four groups at the start of the semester (Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta). Due to drops and additions, some students may have to change groups several weeks into the semester so that the groups remain roughly equal in size.

Elements of this syllabus may be changed if needed to improve the class. You will be notified of any changes via Blackboard.

Course Requirements

All students are expected to do the assigned readings and work, attend class, and participate. Quizzes and the final exam will be based on the readings, lectures, and discussions. Therefore attendance and class participation are vital.

There will be a total of 1000 points for the course. Grades will be made up of class participation, a research assignment, four quizzes, and a final exam. They will be weighed as follows:

- Participation: 200 points
- Quizzes 500 points (125 points each)
- Reaction Papers 100 points (25 points each)
- Debates/Issue Discussions 200 points (25 points each)

Participation

The bulk of the participation grade will be for attendance. Every student starts the semester with 200 participation points, but loses 10 points for each unexcused absence. If you come to class late, it is your responsibility to sign in at the end of class.

Participation in class discussions on minor topics will be periodically noted and points added to your participation grade. Since participation will be noted periodically, the only way to assure that your participation will be credited will be to participate consistently.

In addition, every student is to submit a 1-page paper suggesting a research topic for the class to study during the last two weeks of the semester. The paper should include the topic, a set of questions related to the topic, and the names and authors of 4-6 articles related to the topic (for and against). The deadline to turn in a hardcopy of the paper is October 14. Students who do not turn in a paper will have 10 points deducted from their participation grade. Substandard papers may cause a deduction in points. Students whose suggestions are used in the class will receive a 5-point bonus to their participation grade.

Any participation points over 200 will be counted. That is the only extra credit that will be given in the course.

Quizzes

There will be four quizzes, one roughly every four weeks. They will mostly be a mixture of multiple-choice, true-false and short answer (1-5 sentence) questions. They will be in-class and online. **Please bring your fully-charged laptop computer or other device to class on the day of the quiz.** If you bring a tablet to take the exam, I recommend that you bring a keyboard attachment to facilitate typing. If you do not have a laptop, please see me well before the quiz date so arrangements can be made. The time limit for the quizzes will be 45 minutes. The final quiz will be taken during the exam period: Wednesday, December 14 at 3:30.

The goals of the exams are to gauge the level of understanding the student has of the material covered. They are designed to encourage proper study skills, critical thinking, and analytical reasoning. They will cover readings, lectures and discussions for all major and minor topics covered in the preceding several weeks. None of the quizzes, including the final quiz, will be

cumulative.

Reaction Papers

For each major topic, students in one of the four groups will be assigned to write reaction papers. The reaction papers are individual efforts. They to be 2-3 full pages (Times New Roman, 12-point font, standard 1-inch margins, double-spaced). You are to briefly summarize and evaluate the designated readings on that topic. What arguments do you find persuasive? Why? What arguments are weak? Why? They are due before class on the day of the debate for that topic.

Reaction papers will be graded on the following scale:

23-25 points	Excellent: Student provides writes clearly stated ideas that are drawn from the readings and engage the arguments of the authors; compellingly demonstrates a thorough mastery of the topic and shows meticulous analysis.
20-22 points	Good: Student demonstrates a strong understanding of the issues in the articles and shows strong analytical ability.
18-19 points	Adequate: There are no major omissions or errors of fact or method. Student demonstrates a grasp of the readings and presents generally well-written answers. This is the “normal” grade for papers will no significant errors.
15-17 points	Needs Work: Student omits pertinent facts or fails to give a proper account of the readings; analysis is incomplete or not compelling but is otherwise adequately written.
11-14 points	Rudimentary: Student demonstrates only a perfunctory effort of understanding the readings; relevant facts are omitted or ignored; arguments of the authors are ignored or misrepresented.
1-10 points	Incoherent: There is something written, but it is difficult to figure out what it is or how it relates to the assignment.
0 points	Nothing written

Reaction Paper Dos and Don'ts

(Slightly modified from the list I stole from Dr. Elizabeth Theiss-Morse... but with attribution!)

Do	Do Not
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on one main ideas • Draw on and try to integrate all of the articles • Develop an argument • Push your argument, try to answer the tough questions • Offer compelling criticisms • Offer ideas for other questions to consider • Note gaps, omissions or mistakes in the articles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just summarize • Just give your opinion on a topic (If you cannot articulate an argument for what you think, then it is just an opinion.) • Pick a bunch of little points to address • Critique the writing style • Say how an article was long and/or boring and/or difficult • Ignore relevant parts of the articles • State the obvious

Debates

For each major topic, two groups will prepare to debate on questions related to the topic. One group will prepare arguments in favor while the other group will prepare arguments in opposition. Regardless of your personal opinion of the proposal, you are expected to work with your group to research and prepare for a vigorous defense of your assigned position. After a brief Q&A period of the topic, each group will have ten minutes to present their arguments with a further 5 minutes each for rebuttal. These debates are expected to be a group-wide effort and each group should arrange times to jointly prepare for the debates. Each debate will be followed by a brief general discussion to further flesh-out the arguments. The last 15 minutes of class will be dedicated to open discussion on the issue during which all students may speak and those who debated are free to support their actual position on the issue.

Debates are, largely, graded on a group-wide basis on the following scale:

23-25 points	Content throughout the presentation is well researched and presented succinctly yet fully. Presentation is clearly well prepared and group members have coordinated their portions of the presentation. Counter-arguments are anticipated and addressed.
20-22 points	Content is presented succinctly yet fully for the most part. Research and preparation are evident. Counter-arguments are addressed directly.
18-19 points	Content is presented well but unevenly. Minor gaps in research and preparation are evident. Counter-arguments are addressed, but not fully or completely. This is the grade for unremarkable presentations without any major mistakes or omissions.
15-17 points	Content shows problems with research and succinct presentation; more preparation of the material is clearly necessary. Important questions are not addressed or not addressed well. Counter-arguments are only weakly or passingly addressed.
1-14 points	Presentation of content is disjointed and incoherent; little evidence of preparation. Major omissions are evident. Counter-arguments are not addressed at all.
0 points	Nothing is presented. (A zero will also be earned by students who are absent on the day of their group's debate.)

Class Policies

Make-up assignments

Should you miss a scheduled quiz, you will be assigned zero points for that quiz unless you provide a valid excuse to the instructor. That would include a doctor's note/bill or a cast on a newly broken arm. Non-valid reasons include, but are not limited to, being busy or forgetting to take the quiz.

Incompletes and Withdrawals

Students will only be given an “I” (incomplete) for valid reasons, such as verified military deployment or illness, and only if the student has made substantial satisfactory progress in the course. To withdraw from a course, follow UNL procedures; your instructor will not do it for you.

Laptops and other electronic devices:

Please put away all electronic devices at the beginning of class except those being used for the class. Turn your phone off or put it on silent (not vibrate) mode. The inappropriate use of electronic devices is distracting to you and rude to the instructor and other students. Any student found to be using an electronic device during class for any purpose other than taking notes (laptop) will lose 5 points from his participation grade per class. I will not call you out during class, but will note it in the attendance log. Any student who refuses to turn off an electronic device when asked to do so will be dropped a full letter grade.

We will start with allowing the use of laptops, but the instructor reserves the right to later ban their use except for those students with a documented disability. Even when laptops are used exclusively to take class notes, they virtually eliminate eye contact and limit students’ mental engagement with the material. You are a student, not a stenographer.

Disability Policy

Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the instructor for a confidential discussion of their individual needs for academic accommodation. It is the policy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide flexible and individualized accommodations to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office, 132 Canfield Administration. Their phone number is 472-3787.

Academic Honesty

Plagiarism and cheating, as defined by the UNL Student Code of Conduct, are not allowed. Plagiarism includes self-plagiarism (taking parts of a paper that you had previously written for another class for use in a current assignment without noting that it had come from the earlier work). The in-class punishment schedule for such acts may include a zero for the assignment and failure of the entire course. Major violations will also be reported to the student’s department chairperson or head and to the Judicial Office.

Respect

Please show respect for the opinions of your fellow students. Students should feel free to express their views without fear of condemnation or harassment inside or outside the classroom. Likewise, students should not seek to use the free and open exchange of ideas as a license to provoke or denigrate others. Clearly, there is a balancing act involved, but it can be achieved if students engage each other and the instructor in a spirit of goodwill. Violations of this principle will result consequences ranging from a drop in the student's participation grade to failure of the class.

Grade Scale

The grade scale for this course will be:

A = 94-100 B- = 80-83 D+ = 67-69

A- = 90-93 C+ = 77-79 D = 64-66

B+ = 87-89 C = 74-76 D- = 60-63

B = 84-86 C- = 70-73 F = 0-59

As noted previously, the points for each assignment will added together and the decimal point shifted one to the left to get the final grade. For example, a total of 756 points for all assignments represents a final grade of 75.6: a C.

Debate & Reaction Paper Schedule

Date	Major Topic	Alpha	Bravo	Charlie	Delta
Aug 29	Campus speech codes	Reaction	*	Pro	Con
Sep 2	Race issues on campus	Con	Reaction	*	Pro
Sep 9	Campus sexual assault	Pro	Con	Reaction	*
Sep 14	Is the Affordable Care Act working?	*	Pro	Con	Reaction
Sep 23	Domestic terrorism	Reaction	*	Pro	Con
Sep 28	Illegal immigration	Con	Reaction	*	Pro
Oct 5	Equal pay for equal work?	Pro	Con	Reaction	*
Oct 10	Does "Black Lives Matter" have a point?	*	Pro	Con	Reaction
Oct 21	Should Nebraska reestablish the Death penalty?	Reaction	*	Pro	Con
Oct 26	Campaign finance reform	Con	Reaction	*	Pro
Oct 31	Should Nebraska allow casino gambling?	Pro	Con	Reaction	*
Nov 4	Is divided government a good thing?	*	Pro	Con	Reaction
Nov 16	The national debt	Reaction	*	Pro	Con
Nov 21	American Energy in the 21st century	Con	Reaction	*	Pro
Dec 2	Student proposed major topic 1	Pro	Con	Reaction	*
Dec 7	Student proposed major topic 2	*	Pro	Con	Reaction

Class Schedule

The following is a basic schedule. More details will be made available as needed

Week	Dates	Topic (major topics covered over two days)
August 22	Aug 22	Introduction
	Aug 24	Semi-open Discussion: The 2016 election*
	Aug 26	Campus speech codes (part 1)
August 29	Aug 29	Campus speech codes (part 2)
	Aug 31 – Sep 2	Race issues on campus
September 5	Sep 5	<i>Labor Day – no class</i>
	Sep 7-9	Campus sexual assault
September 12	Sep 12-14	Is the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) working?
	Sep 16	Topics review & quiz 1 preview
September 19	Sep 19	Quiz 1
	Sep 21-23	Domestic terrorism
September 26	Sep 26-28	Illegal immigration
	Sep 30	Campaigns and Elections in America
October 3	Oct 3-5	Equal pay for equal work?
	Oct 7	Does “Black Lives Matter” have a point? (part 1)
October 10	Oct 10	Does “Black Lives Matter” have a point? (part 2)
	Oct 12	Topics review & quiz 2 preview
	Oct 14	Quiz 2 / Topic ideas due
October 17	Oct 17	<i>Fall break – no class</i>
	Oct 19-21	Should Nebraska reestablish the Death penalty?
October 24	Oct 24-26	Campaign finance reform
	Oct 28	Should Nebraska allow casino gambling? (part 1)
October 31	Oct 31	Should Nebraska allow casino gambling? (part 2)
	Nov 2-4	Is divided government a good thing?
November 7	Nov 7	Topics review & quiz 3 preview
	Nov 9	Election 2016 post game show (no readings)*
	Nov 11	Quiz 3
November 14	Nov 14-16	The national debt
	Nov 18	American energy in the 21st century (part 1)
November 21	Nov 21	American energy in the 21st century (part 2)
	Nov 22-25	<i>Thanksgiving – no class</i>
November 28	Nov 28	Student proposed minor topic: Felon voting rights
	Nov 30 – Dec 2	Student proposed major topic: LGBT rights v religious liberties
December 5	Dec 5-7	Student proposed major topic: Gun control
	Dec 9	Topics review & quiz 4 preview / evaluations
December 12	Friday, Dec 16 10:00 AM	Quiz 4

*The discussions on these days will not be “testable”