

Introduction to U.S. Politics

University of Rochester, PSCI 105

Spring 2025

Tue/Thur, 9:40 am - 10:55 am, Meliora 203

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Course Information

Course Description This course will introduce students to the foundations of the United States government. Students will examine important political institutions and the interactions among them to understand how they shape the behavior of political and non-political actors in the United States. Throughout, we will apply analytical techniques from the rational-choice approach to political science (sometimes called the “Rochester School” of political science). Specific topics will include: the need for a state, the purposes of elections, federalism, the three branches of U.S. government, and the role of interest groups in U.S. politics. We also draw extensively upon accounts of the role of race in U.S. political development. This course is appropriate for majors and non-majors with an interest in understanding how and why the U.S. political system works as it does.

Assignments and Expectations I expect students to have read the assigned material and to be prepared to ask questions and engage in discussions that draw upon the readings.

Participation and attendance will be graded (20% of the grade), especially on certain discussion days (see below).

Students will complete four essay assignments (each about 3 pages and worth 20% of the grade). Broadly, these will consist of short essays, 2-4 pages in length, double-spaced. More information will

be provided about each of these, but the topics are as follows: 1) identifying a pair of contradictory forces in founding documents/political thought, 2) writing a bill for a law you will argue ought to exist, 3) investigating a rule (regulation) in the federal register, and 4) understanding the role of political parties in the progression of racism/racial progress in the United States.

Specific times and submission instructions will be given on the assignments themselves, but the due dates are: 1) Wed. February 12 (with revision due Fri. February 14), 2) Wed. March 5 (with revision due Fri. March 7), 3) Fri. April 4, and 4) Mon. April 27 (with revision due Fri. May 2). I will explain the revisions in-class.

Because we will be discussing first drafts of these essays during some of the class sessions, it is crucial that you all stay on schedule. Of course, there will be circumstances where extensions are necessary, but please communicate with me as early as possible if you are having difficulty keeping up with the work.

Materials We will not be using a standard “Intro to U.S. Politics” textbook. Instead, we will rely on a variety of primary and secondary sources (available on Blackboard), as well as a book (available at bookstore or booksellers) that will provide context for the material we learn:

- Kendi, Ibram X. 2023. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. 2nd edition. New York: Bold Type Books.

We will look to Kendi (2023) for context around American political development and American political thought. We will discuss the reasons I assign Kendi and why I think it complements the course material during our first class session. Three additional notes on Kendi’s *Stamped from the Beginning*. 1) Make sure you are using the correct version, *not* the adaptation for young adults. 2) I do not mind if you use the audiobook version, but I would encourage you to take notes while or at least shortly after you finish a chapter. I’ll say more about this in class, but you should still refer to a copy of the book for specific references for your essays. 3) There were not significant changes from the first to second edition, so feel free to use either.

Recommended reading There is a primer on American history/politics that is well worth the small price, especially if you do not have much familiarity with the topics. It is available only in e-book form, from Amazon:

<https://www.amazon.com/Professor-Thinks-Already-About-Politics-ebook/dp/BOBRS3MR5K>

Assistance and Resources to Promote Student Success Please feel free to reach out to me at any point during the course with any concerns or information that you would like me to know to support your success this semester, as well as with any questions about the course.

The University of Rochester respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities. In the event you encounter any barrier(s) to full participation in this course due to the impact of a disability please contact the Office of Disability Resources. The access coordinators in the Office of Disability Resources can meet with you to discuss the barriers you are experiencing and explain the eligibility process for establishing academic accommodations. You can reach the Office of Disability Resources at: disability@rochester.edu; (585) 276-5075; Taylor Hall.

The Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning has a number of resources to improve study habits, including one-on-one study skills consultations, study skills course (CAS 142), quiet study space with peer support (Study Zone), and, for specific courses, one-on-one tutoring, drop-in group tutoring, and weekly study groups.

Student success at the University of Rochester includes more than just academic performance. Please feel comfortable speaking with me about challenges you are experiencing within and outside of the classroom so that I may submit a CARE Referral on your behalf. A CARE Referral is submitted when the level of concern for a student necessitates inclusive, multi-layered support from the campus community. The CARE network administrator only shares information with staff who need to know it to help you. I *care* about your success and am committed to my role in helping you get connected to appropriate campus resources.

Academic Honesty Information

Academic honesty means acting with truthfulness and sincerity in carrying out all aspects of our individual and collaborative work, maintaining ownership over our work and acknowledging our debt to the work of others.

Students can best meet their obligation to academic honesty by adhering to the Academic Honesty Policy in all academic matters. This includes completing their work through their own honest efforts and expecting and encouraging honesty among their peers.

The text above is an excerpt taken from <https://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/>, where students may – and should! – also find the full policy.

Issues of improper conduct (such as insufficient attribution) will be addressed with a formal warning.

Subsequent instances of improper academic conduct or suspected academic misconduct will be passed along to the Board that oversees such matters. As indicated in the guidelines linked above, the punishments for violations are significant. We will include some assignment-specific clarifications in the prompt for each assignment, but if you have questions at any point about whether your conduct adheres to the guidelines, reach out to the instructor (or the TAs, or both).

Introduction. Motivating and explaining the course

Jan. 21 No readings

Topic 1. A state and a constitution

Jan. 23 Readings:

- Declaration of Independence
- U.S. Constitution amendments 3-8
- Kendi, Preface and Prologue
- de Tocqueville, “Tyranny”

Jan. 28 Readings:

- Articles of Confederation
- U.S. Constitution preamble; articles V-VII; and amendment 16
- Kendi, ch 1-2
- Douglass, “Fourth of July”
- Riker, APM ch 8

Topic 2. Democracy, representative government, and elections

Jan. 30 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution article I, section 4; amendments 14-15, 19, 23-24, 26
- Kendi, ch 3-4
- Adams, “Letter”
- Anthony, “Equal Suffrage”

Feb. 4 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 5-6
- Madison, “Federalist 39”
- Riker, LAP ch 9

Topic 3. Federalism

Feb. 6 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution article I, sections 9-10; article IV; and amendments 9-11
- Kendi, ch 7-9
- Bryce, “Dual”

Feb. 11 Readings:

- Grodzins, “Marble”

- Riker, “Federalism”

Feb. 13 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 10-12
- RBG on writing
- Orwell on writing
- * We will discuss your first drafts for essay 1.

Topic 4. Bureaucracy

Feb. 18 Readings:

- TBA

Feb. 20 Readings:

- TBA

Topic 5. A legislature

Feb. 25 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution article I, section 1-3, 5-8; and amendments 17, 27
- Kendi, ch 13-14
- Burke, “Electors”
- Madison, “Federalist 35”

Feb. 27 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 15-16
- Riker, APM ch 2

Topic 6. The executive

Mar. 4 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution article II; amendments 12-13, 20, 22, 25
- Kendi, ch 17-18
- Hamilton, “Federalist 69”

Mar. 6 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 19-20
- * We will discuss your bill proposals.

Mar. 11 Spring break

*** Please be safe!!!

Mar. 13 Spring break

Mar. 18 Readings:

- Howell, podcast
- Riker, “Heresthetics” (first few sections, skim the rest)

Topic 7. Separation of powers & checks and balances

Mar. 20 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 21-22
- Madison, “Federalist 51”

Mar. 25 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 23-25
- Thrower, “Regulatory delay”

Topic 8. The judiciary (and elections)

Mar. 27 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution article III
- Kendi, ch 26-27
- Hamilton, “Federalist 78”

Apr. 1 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 28-29
- Marshall, “Bicentennial”

Apr. 3 No class

- * TA available during class time for additional help on third essay

Topic 9. Interest groups

Apr. 8 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution amendment 2
- Kendi, ch 30-32
- Madison, “Federalist 10”

Apr. 10 Readings:

- Sunstein, “Interest Groups”

Topic 10. Public opinion

Apr. 15 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution amendments 18, 21
- Kendi, ch 33-35
- Lippmann, “Public Opinion”

Apr. 17 Readings:

- Hofstadter, “Paranoid”

Topic 11. Mass media

Apr. 22 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution amendment 1
- Kendi, ch 36-37

Apr. 24 Readings:

- White, “TV Debates”

Conclusion. Closing thoughts and a short case study

April 29 Readings:

- None
- * We will discuss intensively your drafts of the final essay assignment

May 1 Readings:

- Kendi, Epilogue