

POLS 4000
Improving Democracy: How to Fix Government by the People
Oklahoma State University¹

I. Course Overview

The rise of populism and authoritarianism, as well as increased polarization, incivility, gridlock, and attacks on the free press have brought renewed attention to how democracies can improve and adapt. Ideally, democracies protect and promote political equality, and do so by producing policies acceptable to a majority while protecting minority rights. Often though, as recent scholarship has shown, democracies simply die. How can we improve democracy in order to guarantee government by the people for generations to come?

This course encourages students to think critically and creatively about political institutions in order to improve democracy. Students will identify problems, evaluate solutions, and adopt a plan to reform government. Students will complete an individual project and regularly collaborate with their fellow students. Students have the opportunity to practice skills transferrable to the workplace, such as: working in teams, thinking critically and creatively, independent research and writing, coming prepared for meetings, and understanding how to evaluate complex organizations in order to improve outcomes.

II. Assignments and Grading

Your grade for the course will be determined in the following way:

Participation:	10%
Discussion Leader:	10%
Presentation:	10%
Reading Quizzes:	25%
Term Paper:	45%

Participation: This course is built on participation. The whole idea of the course is for you to engage with your classmates in a fun, respectful, and productive setting with the goal of improving American democracy. As such, 10% of your final course grade will be determined by your participation in class. You will be graded on the **quantity and quality of participation**. Excellent participation includes regularly making comments that demonstrate that you've completed the readings and are making an effort to have a productive conversation. You can also earn points by engaging constructively with one another during small-group work or activities. For the shy, emailing me a few discussion questions or an appropriate current events article before class that I can bring up during discussion will also help you earn participation points. You should not expect to earn an A on participation just by showing up.

Discussion Leader: Each student will be designated a discussion leader for at least two of the class meetings. As discussion leader, your job is to develop at least three discussion questions based on

¹ Adapted from Jansa's POLS 4000: Reforming American Democracy syllabus for Spring 2018.

the readings and send them to me via email by the night before class at 11:59 PM. I will use your discussion questions to stimulate discussion that day and may ask you to elaborate on what you think about your question.

Reading Quizzes: You are expected to complete all the assigned readings for the week before coming to class. We will rely on the readings and your thoughts on the readings to structure discussion in class. Since the purpose of the class is for students to consider and understand problems, solutions, and research pertaining to the functioning of American democracy, it is critically important that you read all about those problems, solutions, and research.

As an incentive to complete all of the readings on time, you will be given reading quizzes in class. These will be pop-quizzes and may come in various formats. Attendance in class on the day of the quiz is required to complete the quiz. There are no make-up quizzes.

Term Paper: Students will complete a term paper about a proposed political reform. You will be answering how the proposed political reform will affect American democracy if adopted. The paper should include: a basic description of the proposed reform, discussion of how it can improve American democracy, discussion of how it may hurt American democracy, and whether or not you would be in favor of adopting the proposed reform based on the evidence. You should structure your discussion around the principles of reform discussed in class and use findings from academic research to support your main points.

Possible paper topics include, but are not limited to:

- Automatic voter registration
- National initiative or referendum
- Filibuster reform
- Non-partisan Congress (like Nebraska)
- Reserving seats for women in Congress
- Third party access to presidential debates
- Increasing the number of House seats
- Proportional representation in the Senate
- National primary day
- Open primaries
- Top-two primaries
- National same-day voter registration
- Election Day as a national holiday
- Vote by mail
- Public funding of elections
- Campaign vouchers
- Matching funds for campaigns
- Revolving door reform
- Stricter rules for Super PACs and dark money groups
- Increased spending on congressional staff
- Bi-partisan dual presidency
- Creation/reorganization of the executive branch to address policy problems
- Devil's advocate position in federal agencies
- Line item veto
- Balanced budget amendment
- War powers reform
- Increase/decrease SCOTUS size
- End lifetime appointments for SCOTUS

The term paper is worth 45% of your final grade. You should take it very seriously and work your hardest to produce a solid final product. I will make every effort to guide you through the process. To do this, I will ask you to check-in with me regarding your term paper throughout the semester. These check-ins will count toward your final term paper grade. I will provide numerous comments on the written work you turn in to me for these check-ins. I will also provide a full grading rubric for the term paper early in the semester so that you have a clear understanding of what is expected. We will also be taking a “field trip” to the Low Library for a tutorial on how to find academic sources.

Some of the basic requirements of the term paper are listed below.

- Formatting
 - Name on first line
 - Title centered on second line
 - First paragraph starts on line immediately following title
 - Double spaced
 - Times New Roman font
 - 12-point font
 - 1 inch margins
- Length
 - 8-10 pages for undergraduate students
 - 13-15 pages for graduate students
- Citations
 - APA, APSA, or Chicago citation style throughout
 - At least 3 academic sources for undergraduate students
 - At least 6 academic sources for graduate students

Presentation: Towards the end of the semester, you will be asked to give a brief (5-10 minute) presentation on your term paper topic. This will be part of the constitutional convention portion of the course; you will be trying to sell your classmates on further considering your reform. This presentation is worth 10% of your final grade. A grading rubric will be provided to you during the semester.

Grade scale

The following grading scale will be used for assigning final letter grades.:

- A = 90.00 – 100.00
- B = 80.00 – 89.99
- C = 70.00 – 79.99
- D = 60.00 – 69.99
- F = 0 – 59.99

III. Academic Honesty

You must always adhere to OSU's academic integrity standards. Violations of academic integrity, including unauthorized collaboration, plagiarism, cheating on examinations, helping another person cheat, and unauthorized advance access to examinations, will result in severe penalty. Penalties include: receiving a failing grade on an assignment, examination or course, receiving a notation of a violation of academic integrity on your transcript, and being suspended from the University. You can learn more at <http://academicintegrity.okstate.edu>.

IV. Additional Course Policies

Please see the Oklahoma State University Syllabus Attachment for all other policies in effect and resources available to you for this course.

V. Required Readings

There are no books to purchase for this class. You can find all required readings electronically on the course D2L site.

VI. Course Schedule

Week 1—Course Introduction

Jan 15: NO CLASS

Jan 17: Introduction

- Syllabus

Jan 19: Declining Trust in Government

- Webster “Anger and Declining Trust in Government in the American Electorate”

Week 2—Problems with American Democracy

Jan 22: Polarization, Incivility, and Gridlock

- Binder “Polarized We Govern?”

Jan 24: The Two-Party “Duopoly”

- Fiorina “We live in a two-party duopoly.”

Jan 26: American Oligarchy?

- Martin and Gilens “Testing Theories of American Politics”

Week 3—Principles of Reform

Jan 29: Majoritarianism vs. Consensus

- Lijphart “The Westminster & Consensus Models of Democracy.”

Jan 31: Equal Representation

- Streb “Creating a Model Electoral Democracy.”

Feb 2: Deliberation, Transparency, Accountability

- Johannes “A Framework for Thinking About Reform.”

Week 4—Instant Runoff Voting

Feb 5: What is Instant Runoff Voting?

- Fair Vote “Ranked-Choice Voting/Instant Run-off”

Feb 7: IRV and Third Parties

- Hershey “How American Election Law and Institutions Cripple Third Parties.”
- Mercer “How Ranked-Choice Could Make Voters More Open to Third Party Candidates.”

Feb 9: Benefits of IRV

- Kimball and Anthony “A Different Way of Casting and Counting Votes.”

Week 5—Instant Runoff Voting

Feb 12: Drawbacks of IRV

- Burnett and Kogan “Ballot (and Voter) ‘Exhaustion’ under Instant Run-Off Voting.”

Feb 14: Implementing IRV

- Richie and Penrose “The Fair Representation Act for Congress.”
- Drutman “Maine could become the first state with ranked-choice voting

Feb 16: Term Paper Topic Draft

- Selection of topics, discussion of rubric and expectations

Week 6—Gerrymandering

Feb 19: Tutorial on Academic Research

- Meet in Low Library rm. 206

Feb 21: Elbridge Gerry’s Salamander

- Bullock “Redistricting: Racial and Partisan Issues Past and Present.”
- Markovitch “I ran the worst 5k of my life so that I could explain gerrymandering to you.”

Feb 23: The Redistricting Process

- Leavitt “A Citizens Guide to Redistricting.”

Week 7—Gerrymandering

Feb 26: Gerrymandering in the States

- Listen to assigned episode of FiveThirtyEight’s The Gerrymandering Project and report on state **(counts as a quiz)**

Feb 28: Gerrymandering, Polarization, and Representation

- Kogan and McGhee “Redistricting and Representation: Searching for Fairness.”
- Mann “Polarizing the House of Representatives: How Much Does Gerrymandering Matter?”

Mar 2: Term Paper Work Day

- **Turn-in draft of description of proposed reform**
- Begin work on annotated bibliography

Week 8—Gerrymandering Solutions

Mar 5: Wasted Votes, the Efficiency Gap, and *Gill v. Whitford*

- Stephanopoulos “The Research that Convinced SCOTUS to take the Wisconsin Gerrymandering Case.”

Mar 7: Independent Redistricting Commissions

- Cain “Redistricting Commissions: A Better Political Buffer?”

Mar 9: The Problem of Self-Sorting

- Reyes “Why Proportional Representation May be a Better Solution Than California’s Independent Redistricting Commission.”

- Masket, Winburn, and Wright. “The Gerrymanders are Coming!”

Week 9—Legislative Term Limits

Mar 12: The Allure of Term Limits

- Karp “Explaining Public Support for Legislative Term Limits.”

Mar 14: Creating Turnover

- Sarbaugh-Thompson et al. “Democracy Among Strangers: Term Limits’ Effects on Relationships between State Legislators in Michigan.”

Mar 16: Lobbyists, Parties, and Term Limits

- Masket and Shor. “Polarization without Parties: Term Limits and Partisanship in Nebraska.”
- **Annotated bibliography due**

Week 10—Spring Break

- **NO CLASS**

Week 11—Term Limits & The Electoral College

Mar 26: Case Studies of Term Limited States

- Report on assigned case studies (**counts as a quiz**)
- Hand back and discuss annotated bibliographies

Mar 28: The Framers and the Electoral College

- Pfiffner and Hartke “The Electoral College and the Framers’ Distrust of Democracy.”
- Edwards “The Origins of the Electoral College.”

Mar 30: Near Misses: The Popular Vote and the Electoral Vote

- Edwards “The Electoral College and Political Equality.”
- Posner “In Defense of the Electoral College.”

Week 12—Term Paper Work Week

- **NO CLASS**
- Work independently on term papers.
- **Wednesday: email revised sections to instructor**
- **Friday: email help/hurt outline to instructor**

Week 13—The Electoral College

Apr 9: One Person, One Vote in the Electoral College

- Gaines and Jenkins. “Apportionment Matters: Fair Representation in the Electoral College.”

Apr 11: Alternatives to the Electoral College

- Tolbert and Gracey “Changing How America Votes for President.”

Apr 13: Partisan Challenges to Electoral College Reform

- Ardoin and Parsons. “Partisan Bias in the Electoral College.”

Week 14—Mock Constitutional Convention

Apr 16: Opening the Convention

- The U.S. Constitution, especially the amendment procedure and the amendments

Apr 18: Committee Work

Apr 20: Committee Work

Week 15—Mock Constitutional Convention

Apr 23: Committee Presentations

Apr 25: Committee Presentations

Apr 27: Deliberation & Voting

- **Deadline to send paper drafts to instructor for comments**

Week 16—Mock Constitutional Convention

Apr 30: Individual Presentations

May 2: Individual Presentation

May 4: Closing the Convention

- **Term Papers Due!**

Additional recommended readings:

- Carey, Niemi, and Powell. “The Effects of Term Limits on State Legislatures.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly*.
- Moncrief and Thompson. “Lobbyists’ Perspectives on the Effects of State Legislative Term Limits.” *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*.
- Swift and VanderMolen. “Term Limits and Collaboration Across the Aisle: An Analysis of Bipartisan Cosponsorship in State Legislatures.” *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*.
- Cox and Katz. *Elbridge Gerry’s Salamander: The Electoral Consequences of the Reapportionment Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.
- McDaniel. “Writing the Rules to Rank Candidates: The Impact of IRV on Racial Group Turnout in San Francisco.” *Journal of Urban Affairs*.
- Burmila. “The Electoral College after Census 2010 and 2020.” *Perspectives on Politics*.

- McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal. “Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?” *American Journal of Political Science*.
- McDonald. “Redistricting and Competitive Districts.” In *The Marketplace of Democracy*, ed. Michael P. McDonald and John Samples.
- Brunell. “Rethinking Redistricting: How Drawing Uncompetitive Districts Eliminates Gerrymanders, Enhances Representation, and Improves Attitudes toward Congress.” *PS: Political Science and Politics*.
- Aldrich, Reifler, and Munger. “Sophisticated and myopic? Citizen preferences for Electoral College reform.” *Public Choice*.
- Kousser. *Term Limits and the Dismantling of State Legislative Professionalism*. Cambridge University Press.