

**POLS 4333**  
**Improving Democracy: How to Fix Government by the People**  
Spring 2021  
Online Synchronous Course  
Tuesdays & Thursdays 3:00-4:15

**I. Instructor Information**

Instructor: Dr. Joshua Jansa  
Email: [joshua.jansa@okstate.edu](mailto:joshua.jansa@okstate.edu)  
Work Phone: 405-744-0420  
Office Hours: Tuesday & Thursday 1:00-2:45 via Zoom, or by appointment.

**II. Course Overview**

This is an online course that examines ideas for reforming American democracy. Polarization, incivility, vitriol, and gridlock define politics today. The degradation of the democratic process has sadly culminated in the violent storming of the U.S. Capitol. When extreme polarization renders government unable to deal with crises, and people unable to trust peaceful, legal processes, democracies die. When democracies die, they are replaced with authoritarian regimes that subvert checks and balances, erode civil liberties, and curb free and fair elections. We face such a crisis today in the world's oldest democracy.

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.

**III. Getting Started in Canvas and on Zoom**

This course is taught synchronously, meaning we will have live class sessions online every Tuesday and Thursday at 3:00 PM via Zoom. To access the class session, use the link below and follow the instructions for setting up Zoom on your computer.

Join class using this link: <https://zoom.us/j/97782597082>

You can also access all readings, activities, announcements, and exams through Canvas. To access the course site, go to <https://canvas.okstate.edu/> and sign-in with

your okey username and password. If you have any problems accessing the course site, please let me know as soon as possible!

You are also encouraged to connect with me, especially if any problems or questions arise, during virtual office hours using Zoom. Office hours are Tuesday & Thursday 1:00-2:45 via Zoom. I will use the “wait room” feature on Zoom to ensure that we have a private conversation while other students wait their turn to attend office hours.

Join office hours using this link: <https://zoom.us/j/99721379732>

In general, email is the best way to contact me. I will only respond to emails from your okstate.edu email address. We can chat via email, or we can use email to set up a time to chat on the phone or Zoom. Just email me to set up a time to talk. It is important for you to stay in touch, particularly if any problems arise. You are also encouraged to connect during virtual office hours, following the Zoom instructions above.

#### **IV. Assignments and Grading**

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

Participation:	10%
Reading Quizzes:	25%
Term Paper:	40%
Paper Presentation:	10%
Convention Report:	15%

Participation: Even though we will meet via Zoom, this course is built on your 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 in small “committees” as we prepare to hold a mock Constitutional Convention at the end of the semester. For the shy, emailing me a discussion question or an appropriate current events article 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 Zooming in.

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 from time to time. These will be “pop-quizzes” in that they are currently unscheduled. However, you will be notified when they are available and I will remind you when they are due; I will post the quiz on Canvas at the beginning of the week and you will have till the end of the week to complete the quiz. Each quiz may cover any of the material since the previous quiz.

Term Paper: Students will complete an 8-10 page 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
- Non-partisan Congress (like Nebraska)
- Reserving seats for women and/or racial minorities in Congress
- Improving 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
- Eliminate primaries (i.e. let party leaders decide nominees)
- Election Day as a national holiday
- Universal vote by mail
- Democracy vouchers/matching funds
- Greater disclosure of Super PAC and dark money group spending
- Increased spending on congressional staff
- Legislative term limits
- Greater federal role in elections
- Media regulations to limit spread of disinformation
- Devil’s advocate position in federal agencies
- Instituting line item veto
- Increase/decrease SCOTUS size
- End lifetime appointments/create term limits for SCOTUS
- Add states to the Union
- Multimember districts
- Curtailing president’s pardon power
- Reforming impeachment and/or 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment

The term paper is worth 40% of your final grade. You should take it 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” regarding your term paper throughout the semester. These check-ins are noted on the schedule below and will count toward your final term paper grade.

In addition, one of our political science master’s students—Bobby Dorrell—will be available as a writing consultant. He is available to answer questions about finding scholarly research related to your topic, structuring your paper, clarifying your arguments, etc. His contact information is:

Bobby Dorrell  
M.A. Student in Political Science  
Email: [bobby.dorrell@okstate.edu](mailto:bobby.dorrell@okstate.edu)  
Office Hours: Tuesday & Thursday 10:00-12:00 via Zoom.  
Zoom link:  
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89480335915?pwd=QjJIUEtuUIFuZEpjRk5SWUJJEQmkyQT09>

Bobby or I will provide comments on the written work you turn in for check-ins. I will 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 cover how to find and cite scholarly research in class.

Paper Presentation: During the Constitutional Convention portion of the class (see schedule below), you will be asked to give a brief (5 minute) presentation via Zoom on your term paper topic. The presentation should be informative and persuasive; you will be trying to sell your fellow “convention delegates” on further considering/not considering your reform. This presentation is worth 10% of your final grade. A grading rubric will be provided to you during the semester.

Convention Report: Throughout the semester, you will be working in “committees” to study potential reforms to American government. Specifically, we will cover 1) ranked choice voting, 2) electoral college reform, 3) gerrymandering reform, 4) filibuster reform. At the end of the semester your committee will need to produce a report that explains the committee’s position on whether each of these reforms should be adopted as a constitutional amendment, an explanation why, and details on what the reform will do. In the report will also be a section on reforms to be studied based on which of the paper presentations resonated with the committee. The report should be about 5-7 pages and is worth 15% of your final grade.

### 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

## **V. Late Work**

If any assignment is not turned by the time specified by the instructor, it will be considered late. Late assignments will be discounted a full letter grade each day it is late. After 5 days, the assignment will be scored a 0. I also cannot accept any work after May 7th at 11:59 PM (the end of finals week) because final course grades are due soon after to the University. The late penalty will apply unless you have a documented, unforeseen, extraordinary circumstance that prevented you from completing an assignment on time. I should be notified as soon as possible of the circumstance. I will work with students experiencing such circumstances on a case-by-case basis to come up with the best plan for getting the work done well and in a timely manner.

## **VI. 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>.

## **VII. 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.

## **VIII. Required Readings**

There are no books to purchase for this class. You can find all required readings on Canvas.

## **IX. Course Schedule**

- Readings listed in bullet points under each date; readings should be completed by class time on date listed.
- **Term paper progress assignments listed under each date in bold.**

### Week 1—Introduction & Problems with American Democracy

Jan 19: Course Introduction

- Syllabus

Jan 21: American Rage

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

### Week 2—Problems with American Democracy

Jan 26: Polarized Duopoly

- Drutman “The New Era of Toxic Politics.”

Jan 28: Unequal Representation for the Rich and Poor

- Martin and Gilens “Testing Theories of American Politics.”

### Week 3—Problems with American Democracy

Feb 2: Debating Who Belongs

- Mettler & Lieberman “Backsliding.”

Feb 4: Rising Authoritarianism

- Mettler & Lieberman “How Four Threats Endanger Democracy.”

### Week 4—Principles of Reform

Feb 9: Where to Begin?

- Johannes “A Framework for Thinking About Reform.”

Feb 11: One Person, One Vote

- Streb “Creating a Model Electoral Democracy.”
- **Pick paper topics**

### Week 5—Principles of Reform

Feb 16: Reestablishing Norms

- Levitsky & Ziblatt “The Guardrails of Democracy.”

Feb 18: Convention Planning

- U.S. Constitution, especially Article V amendment procedures and the amendments
- **How to find scholarly sources tutorial**

### Week 6—Ranked Choice Voting

Feb 23: RCV and Its Benefits

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

Feb 25: RCV and Multiple Parties

- Drutman “Two Few: The Case for Multiparty Democracy.”
- Mercer “How Ranked-Choice Could Make Voters More Open to Third Party Candidates.”

### Week 7—Ranked Choice Voting

March 2: Implementing RCV and Its Drawbacks

- Drutman “The Save American Democracy Act.”
- Burnett and Kogan “Ballot (and Voter) ‘Exhaustion’ under Instant Run-Off Voting.”

March 4: SPRING WELLNESS DAY – NO CLASS

### Week 8—Electoral College Reform

March 9: Is This What the Framers Wanted?

- Edwards “The Origins of the Electoral College.”

March 11: Political Equality and the Electoral College

- Edwards “The Electoral College and Political Equality.”
- Gaines and Jenkins. “Apportionment Matters: Fair Representation in the Electoral College.”
- **Annotated bibliography due**

#### Week 9—Electoral College Reform

March 16: Alternatives to the Electoral College

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

March 18: Convention Committee Day

#### Week 10—Gerrymandering

March 23: Elbridge Gerry’s Salamander

- Bullock “Redistricting: Racial and Partisan Issues Past and Present.”
- Leavitt “A Citizens Guide to Redistricting” pages 1-36.

March 25: Polarization, Gerrymandering, and Self-Sorting

- Enten “Ending Gerrymandering Won’t Fix What Ails America.”
- Martin and Webster “The Real Culprit behind Geographic Polarization.”
- **Outline (i.e. thesis, description of reform, pro/con main points) due**

#### Week 11—Gerrymandering

March 30: How the States Approach Redistricting

- Leavitt “A Citizens Guide to Redistricting” pages 40-83.

April 1: Court Challenges

- Kogan and McGhee “Redistricting and Representation: Searching for Fairness.”
- Stephanopoulos “The Research that Convinced SCOTUS to take the Wisconsin Gerrymandering Case.”

#### Week 12—Filibuster Reform

April 6: Filibuster Use and Abuse

- Binder “The History of the Filibuster”
- Koger “The Rise of the 60-vote Senate.”

April 8: Filibuster and Inequality

- Enns et al “Congressional gridlock helps to make income inequality worse.”

#### Week 13—Filibuster Reform

April 13: SPRING WELLNESS DAY—NO CLASS

April 15: Fixing the Senate

- Klein “The case for ending the filibuster.”
- Arenberg “Save the filibuster!”
- **Rough drafts due**

#### Week 14—Constitutional Convention

April 20: Convention Committee Day

April 22: Convention Report Drafting

Week 15—Constitutional Convention

April 27: Individual Delegate Paper Presentations

April 29: Individual Delegate Paper Presentations

- **Final Papers due**

Week 16—Finals Week

Thursday May 6: **Final Convention Reports Due by 3:50 PM**