

Colby College

Government 214 Political Parties and Elections in the United States

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How often does a professor start a syllabus with a confession? I have changed this syllabus drastically each of the last three times I have taught this course, mostly because I struggle to be comfortable with how it is taught. That is especially odd in that I have written a textbook and have edited two readers for a course like this one, so my confusion is not for lack of forethought! Let me explain a little.

Two approaches dominate the teaching on this subject. Some professors teach about political parties—their histories, functions, organizations, etc. Students tend to be bored by these courses and deem them irrelevant. One of the things you will learn in this course is the low esteem in which most Americans hold political parties. If you are not enamored with party politics, party leaders, and the like, you are not alone. And I think the low pre-enrollment of the course reflects this—at least I hope it does!

Other professors teach about elections—who runs, how they run, how much it costs, how polls are conducted, the mechanics of making television commercials, etc. Students are often excited by such courses but have difficulty putting them into perspective. How does one election—as these courses often focus on the election at hand—relate to others? Are campaign managers, like generals, susceptible to charges of fighting the last war over again, instead of looking at new situations? What does how campaigns are run really have to do with how we are governed? Will you be a better informed citizen, a more knowledgeable participant with that information?

My goal has always been to combine the two approaches. I discuss the history and place of political parties, because I believe that American democracy, indeed representative democracy in any polity, is unthinkable without some such organizing element. And, quite frankly, the colorful history of our political parties interests me—and I hope it will interest you. I also discuss elections, because I think parties without the context of elections, are irrelevant, and because more students take this course in election years, for obvious reasons. I also spend a good deal of time analyzing factors related to parties and elections—the laws, rules, and technology of elections (the context), the voters and non-voters in elections (the participants), and the leaders who are elected to serve in government under a party label (the results).

But I think the course this year has to do more. It has to address the question whether or not this whole process works. What does it say about the electoral process if more than half of the eligible electorate does not vote? Newscasters kid about how everyone blames the media, but what role should the media play in an

election? Does it play that role well? What about the choices we face? Are you satisfied with Clinton versus Dole (or Perot)? Do you know enough to choose wisely? Do you know enough to choose in your own best interest? Does it matter? These are all troubling questions, and I think we should be discussing them. So we will. I am not going to desert the readings; I still believe that the material of this course deserves study. But the focus will be different. For each topic we will be evaluating the process—and trying to ascertain what standards to apply.

Let me also make you aware of my goals for this course. When this course is over I want you to understand politics at a number of different levels. I want you to see how politics of today fits into an historical context; I want you to understand the intricacies of the modern political environment—so that you can be informed, participating citizens; but mostly I want you to understand and be able to discuss and write about the value questions which underlie how our system does or does not work. Why is the process constantly in flux? What questions should we be asking about how parties do their job, about how nominations are achieved and who runs for office, about who votes and does not vote, about the ability of citizens to express their policy views at the polls, about how campaigns are financed, about what kinds of mandates our elected leaders receive and what they do with them? I want you to have enough information so that you can ask tough questions—questions without answers—and know how to go about analyzing various ways in which a political system can and/or does perform.

Enough philosophy and goals—how are we going to do this? As I said, I have written a textbook for a course like this one; authors/teachers are faced with a dilemma. I think my book is the best available, but I really feel funny assigning it—and reaping the royalties—besides, it is in need of revising. So, I want you to be aware that it exists, but it will not be assigned. Each week we will be discussing a separate topic, the subject of typical chapters in my text and others. One of the things I hope we will discuss is what should be in a chapter covering that topic, as I plan to do another edition of the book—so some of you might want to scan what I have written before. I hope to have it available for you electronically. But you will be assigned other readings— chapters from the two anthologies I edited (less conflict of interest as I split the royalties with the other authors) and another on the midterm election and a classic book on presidential elections. These readings should give you the background for informed discussions.

One important aspect of this course is the ability to discuss politics, to understand the critical issues and to debate them. I do not mean partisan issues, though partisan dimensions are important. Rather I am talking about issues of democracy, of how a well-functioning electoral system should work. You will be asked to participate in discussions each week—and to lead either one or two discussions during the course. We will talk about this in the first lecture.

Another important aspect of the course will be a research paper. We will discuss options in the first class. However, the general topic is simple. I want you to analyze some aspect of the 1996 election. This is a small class, so I will give you leeway on this paper. Some of you might want to do your own analyses of some

aspect of the election. Others might want to work together in exploring the election results for either the presidency or the House or Senate, perhaps isolating factors that have predictive value, etc. In any case, I want these paper in before Thanksgiving, so you do not get caught up in the crunch of other classes.

And yet another part will be your deciding on what kind of final exam you want to take--a take home essay, an in class exam, or an oral exam--so that you can best tell me what you have learned in this course. We will talk more about all of this in the first class. And I will probably lead the first week's discussion to give you some idea about what I want.

E-mail

As a class, we will be communicating with each other by way of e-mail. If you do not have an active account, activate your account today. I circulate a class email list, so you can communicate with each other. If you are leading a class and want students to think about certain questions or (God forbid!) do some extra reading, this is how to communicate. I will do the same. And I will expect you to have read your e-mail messages well in advance of class.

Readings

The following books have been ordered at the bookstore and will be read in their entirety:

Klinkner, Philip A. *Midterm: The Elections of 1994 in Context*

L. Sandy Maisel, ed., *The Parties Respond*, 2nd edition

L. Sandy Maisel and William G. Shade, eds., *Parties and Politics in American History*

Polsby, Nelson W. and Aaron Wildavsky, *Presidential Elections: Strategies and Structures in American Politics*, 9th edition (referred to as P and W)

These books are optional but give you a good feel about how politicians live and work and feel:

Richard F. Fenno, *The Presidential Odyssey of John Glenn*

Richard F. Fenno, *When Incumbency Fails: The Senate Career of Mark Andrews*

L. Sandy Maisel, *From Obscurity to Oblivion*

Course Requirements

The requirements for the course are:

- (1) Class attendance and participation (10%);
- (2) Discussion leadership (25%)
- (3) Research project--due before Thanksgiving (30%);
- (4) A final examination--take home, in class, or oral as you choose (35%).

Organization of the Course

<i>Date</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Reading</i>
Sept. 10	Introduction	
Sept. 12, 17, 19	History of Political Parties	Maisel, Ch. 1 Maisel and Shade, Chs. 1-4, 6, 7
Sept. 24, 26 Oct. 1, 3	Political Participation and Voting Behavior	Maisel, Chs. 5 and 6 Maisel and Shade, Ch. 9, 10 Klinkner, Chs. 6-8 P and W, Chs. 1-2
Oct. 8, 10	State and Local Nominations	Klinkner, Ch. 9 Maisel, Ch. 7 Maisel, <i>Obscurity</i>
Oct. 15 Oct. 17	Fall Break No Class	
Oct. 22, 24	Presidential Nominations	Maisel, Chs. 4 and 8 P and W, 3-4 Fenno, <i>John Glenn</i>
Oct. 29, 31	State and Local Elections	Klinkner, Chs. 1-4, 6-8, 10 Fenno, <i>Mark Andrews</i>
Nov. 5, 7	Presidential Elections	Maisel, Chs. 9, 11 P and W, Chs. 5-7
Nov. 12, 14	Party Organization	Maisel, Chs. 2, and 3 Maisel and Shade, Ch. 11
Nov. 19, 21	Campaign Finance	Klinkner, Ch. 5 Maisel, Ch. 10 P and W, Ch. 3
Nov. 26	Paper Discussion Papers due: late papers will be penalized three points a day	
Dec. 3, 5	Party in Government	Maisel, Chs. 12, 13, 14 Maisel and Shade, Chs. 5, 8
Dec. 10, 12	Party Reform	Maisel and Shade, Ch. 12 Maisel, Chs. 15 and 16