

POLSW3921 -- American Politics Seminar

Reforming American Government: Domestic and International Perspectives

Columbia University, Fall 2014

Professor: Raymond A. Smith, Ph.D.

Class meeting: Tuesdays, 6:10-8pm

Office Hours: Before and after class and by appointment

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This course will consider a range of possible reforms to American government drawing both from domestic US ideas and experiences (including those at the state level) and from international examples from institutions and practices in other democracies.

The principal requirement for this course is a research paper of roughly 25-30 pages that is to draw on both primary and secondary sources. The paper should pose and answer a significant research question relevant to the topic of the reform of American government and politics. Part of some classes will be dedicated to a research workshop, with a brief review of key issues in research and discussion of the status of class members' research. At specified points in the semester, students will submit and discuss in class: a topic, a research question, a description of primary data sources, a partial bibliography, an outline, and a final draft.

As a seminar, the focus of each class will be a discussion of the readings and their implications for the reform of American government and politics. A list of weekly discussion questions will be distributed in class. All students are required to complete all readings, with designated students each week taking a lead role in presenting and facilitating discussion about the readings and their implications for government reform. Brief written summaries and analyses of the readings as well as answers to reading-related questions will be required each week. Students will also contribute to an in-class "mock constitutional convention" as a mechanism for applying the concepts and ideas discussed in class.

The final grade will be calculated on the following basis:

- responses to written weekly questions and in-class presentations-- 15%;
- research paper-related assignments – 15%;
- "mock constitutional convention" participation – 15%
- final draft of research paper – 55%

Readings

All of these books have been ordered at the Columbia University Bookstore and are also available on reserve at Butler Library. Additional readings (as noted below) have also been placed on reserve at Butler.

Sanford Levinson (2006) *Our Undemocratic Constitution: Where the Constitution Goes Wrong (and How We the People Can Correct It)*

Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein (2012) *It's Even Worse than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*

Larry J. Sabato (2007) *A More Perfect Constitution: 23 Proposals to Revitalize our Constitution and Make America a Fairer Country*

John Paul Stevens (2014) *Six Amendments: How and Why We Should Change the Constitution*

Matthew Streb (2013) *Rethinking American Electoral Democracy, 2nd Edition*

One other book that we will be using extensively (and which is also on reserve at Butler and for which used copies can be purchased online) is:

Raymond A. Smith (2010) *Importing Democracy: Ideas from Around the World to Reform and Revitalize American Politics and Government*

Course Schedule

The following is the anticipated course schedule, which may be subject to slight modification as the semester progresses. In addition, a limited number of readings may be added as the semester progresses.

September 2: Introduction, Overview, and Organizational Meeting

Readings:

- US Constitution: Original Text plus Amendments (Appendix in Sabato book)

September 9: Establishing the Need for Reform

Readings:

- Ornstein and Mann: Preface and Introduction
- Sabato: Preamble
- Levinson: Prelude, Introduction, Ch. 1

September 16: Reforming Presidential Elections

---Ideas for research paper topic due in class---

Readings:

- Sabato: Ch 4
- Streb: Ch, 8, 9
- Raymond A. Smith, *Ending the Endless Election Season: Five Ideas from Around the World to Streamline, Simplify, and Shorten the U.S. Electoral Process* Policy Brief for the Progressive Policy Institute, January 2013:
http://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/01.2013_Smith_Ending-the-Endless-Election-Season.pdf

September 23: Library Consultation and Research-Focused Session

-- Research paper question due to the professor via e-mail by Monday, September 22--

September 30: Further Reforming Parties and Elections

--Annotated bibliography of secondary sources and statement regarding primary sources due in class --

Readings:

- Stevens: Ch. 2, 3
- Streb: 7, 10
- Raymond A. Smith, *Importing Democracy: Ideas from Around the World to Reform and Revitalize American Politics and Government* [on reserve at Butler library], Ch. 1, 2

October 7: Reforming the Executive Branch

-- Refined research paper question due in class--

Readings:

- Sabato: Ch. 2
- Levinson: Ch. 3
Raymond A. Smith, "The Fine Art of Cabinet-Making: Five Ways to Build a Stronger Executive Team," Policy Brief for the Progressive Policy Institute, May, 2012:
http://progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/05.2012-Smith_The-Fine-Art-of-Cabinet-Making_Five-Ways-to-Build-a-Stronger-Executive-Team1.pdf

October 14: Reforming the Legislative Branch

Readings:

- Sabato: Ch. 1
- Levinson: Ch. 2

- Raymond A. Smith, *Importing Democracy: Ideas from Around the World to Reform and Revitalize American Politics and Government* [on reserve at Butler library], Ch. 14, 15, 16

October 21: Reforming the Judicial Branch

--One-page outlines of paper arguments due in class; be prepared to discuss --

Readings:

- Levinson: Ch 4
- Sabato: Ch. 3
- Raymond A. Smith, *Importing Democracy: Ideas from Around the World to Reform and Revitalize American Politics and Government* [on reserve at Butler library], Ch. 17, 18

October 28: Reforming the Constitution

Readings:

- Stevens, Prologue
- Levinson: Ch. 6
- Sabato: Ch, 6
- Raymond A. Smith, *Reclaiming the most powerful tool of reform: Constitutional amendments* on Republic 3.0, July 21, 2014:
<http://republic3-0.com/reclaiming-powerful-tool-reform-constitutional-amendments/>

November 4: Election Day Break – No Class Meeting

November 11: A Second Constitutional Convention?

- Levinson: Ch. 6
- Sabato: Ch. 7
- Raymond A. Smith, *Importing Democracy: Ideas from Around the World to Reform and Revitalize American Politics and Government* [on reserve at Butler library], Ch. 20, 21

November 18: Mock Constitutional Convention Exercise, Part I

November 25: Mock Constitutional Convention Exercise, Part II

December 2: Student Paper Presentations

--All final papers due in class; be prepared to present key findings--