

Introduction to U.S. Politics

University of Rochester, PSCI 105

Spring 2026

Tue/Thur, 11:05 am - 12:20 pm, Dewey 1101

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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.

Attendance and participation will be graded (10% of the grade).

Students will take three in-class exams (each worth 30% of the grade). The exams will consist of several short-answer questions and one or two longer-answer (think: short essay) questions.

The exam dates are: 1) Tues., February 17, 2) Tues., March 31, and 3) Thur., April 30., all in class in a Blue Book that we will provide.

The best way to prepare for the exams is to do the reading before class and attend class. The exams will not be cumulative, but they will draw on key themes we build up throughout the course – so those concepts are fair game. Students will *not* be allowed notes, books, or any other materials during the exams.

Please work through the Office of Disability Resources for special exam accommodations.

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. Availing yourself of the audiobook would likely be most effective if done in conjunction with a hard copy of the book. 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. 20 No readings

Topic 1. A state and a constitution

Jan. 22 Readings:

- Declaration of Independence
- U.S. Constitution amendments 3-8
- Kendi, Prologue
- Douglass, “Fourth of July”

Jan. 27 Readings:

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

Topic 2. Democracy, representative government, and elections

Jan. 29 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. 3 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 5-6
- Madison, “Federalist 39”

Topic 3. Federalism

Feb. 5 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution article I, sections 9-10; article IV; and amendments 9-11
- Kendi, ch 7-8
- Bryce, “Dual”

Feb. 10 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 9-10
- Grodzins, “Marble”
- Riker, LAP ch 9

Feb. 12 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 11-12
- Riker, “Federalism”

Exam #1 Covering Topics 1-3

Feb. 17 In-class test in Blue Book we provide

Topic 4. A legislature

Feb. 19 Readings:

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

Feb. 24 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 15-16
- Madison, “Federalist 35”
- Riker, APM ch 2

Topic 5. The executive

Feb. 26 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution article II; amendments 12-13, 20, 22, 25
- Kendi, ch 17-18

Mar. 3 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 19-20
- Hamilton, “Federalist 69”

Mar. 5 Readings:

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

No class. Spring break. Please be safe!!!

Mar. 10 No readings

Mar. 12 No readings

Topic 6. Separation of powers & checks and balances

Mar. 17 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 21-23
- Madison, “Federalist 51”

Mar. 19 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 24-25
- Thrower, “Regulatory delay”

Topic 7. The judiciary (and elections)

Mar. 24 Readings:

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

Mar. 26 Readings:

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

Exam #2 Covering Topics 4-7

Mar. 31 In-class test in Blue Book we provide

Topic 8. Interest groups

Apr. 2 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution amendment 2
- Kendi, ch 30-31
- Madison, “Federalist 10”

Apr. 7 Readings:

- Sunstein, “Interest Groups”

Topic 9. Public opinion

Apr. 9 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution amendments 18, 21
- Kendi, ch 32-33

Apr. 14 Readings:

- Lippmann, “Public Opinion”
- Hofstadter, “Paranoid”

Topic 10. Mass media

Apr. 16 Readings:

- U.S. Constitution amendment 1
- Kendi, ch 34-35

Apr. 21 Readings:

- White, “TV Debates”

Conclusion. Closing thoughts and a short case study

Apr. 23 Readings:

- Kendi, ch 36-37

Apr. 28 Readings:

- Kendi, Epilogue

Exam #3 Covering Topics 8-10

Apr. 30 In-class test in Blue Book we provide