

**Political Science 296**  
**Capstone Seminar: Fixing American Democracy**  
Spring Semester 2021  
Clark University

Monday 3:00-5:50

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Office Hours (**Online Only**): Wednesdays 10:30-12:00, or by appointment

*Description*

Throughout its history, the United States has had a lively debate about the rules of elections and governance. We now find ourselves, however, confronting overwhelming evidence that our democratic rules and norms are not working. Polarization between the parties is at the highest level it has been in at least a century, and it has become difficult for our Congress to pass even routine legislation, let alone to address crises such as those that have confronted the United States over the past year. Public opinion surveys show widespread discontent with government and a lack of fit between the views of citizens and those of the people we elect. The Trump presidency has exposed many glaring problems in the restraints our laws place upon the president. Many American citizens are quick to embrace false conspiracy theories about politics, and, as we saw this January, to act upon them. And rapid changes in technology have rendered our election laws ill-equipped to regulate campaigns in the manner that they did a decade or so ago.

Despite these problems, there is reason to expect the upcoming decade to be a time of radical change. The last time our nation exhibited as much economic inequality as we see today, Progressive Era reformers enacted many laws that restructured our politics and our economy. A similar agenda may well be on the horizon today. Yet it is not uncommon for well-intentioned political reforms to have negative side effects. Before we get carried away with proposals for reform, it is important to learn from the past or from other democratic nations.

In this capstone seminar, we will explore contemporary proposals to improve the democratic process in America. We will do so by looking first at the “big picture” – at theories about how government reforms work. We will then explore a range of different reforms to our election process, to the capacity of our political institutions, and to our civic culture. Each of you will write a senior thesis on one particular reform – on its path to implementation, on its historical roots, and on the likely consequences of that reform. While many Americans believe that our democracy faces serious problems, we differ on solutions. The goal of this class, and of your project, is to build upon your experience as a political science major and the research skills you have acquired at Clark so that you are equipped to be a pragmatic, realistic advocate for improving American democracy.

## Readings

The following books are required for the course and are available at the college bookstore:

- Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).  
Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* ((New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).  
Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).  
Bruce Cain, *Democracy More or Less: America's Political Reform Quandary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).  
Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).  
Jesse Wegman, *Let the People Pick the President* (New York: St. Martin's, 2020).  
William Howell and Terry Moe, *Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).  
Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead, *A Lot of People are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).  
Robert Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).  
Eitan Hersh, *Politics is for Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

And this book is optional – but free online. It provides a good summary of reform proposals:

Douglas Amy, *Second-Rate Democracy* (<https://www.secondratedemocracy.com/>).

All other readings on the syllabus are available online or will be provided on Moodle.

## *Some Thoughts on the Organization of the Class*

Capstone seminars are designed to provide you with an opportunity to put all of the things you've learned in your American politics courses at Clark together, and to use that background to develop your own research project. This means that you have more of a role in running this course than is the case in other classes, and the degree to which this class is a success depends on how much effort you put in. I have structured the class rather loosely; we have a lot of reading, but you and your classmates will be in charge of deciding how we discuss the readings and how we organize our class sessions. It is imperative that you do the reading, that you do the weekly discussion questions, and that you come to class prepared to be an active participant.

The semester is structured so as to help you get started early on your research paper. For the first four weeks I will try to work through a number of different concepts and theoretical approaches to the study of political reform. Some of this will be review to you, some will not. The goal during these first weeks will be to present a wide array of potential topics to you, and to help provide us with a common vocabulary for the weeks that follow. By the fifth week you will have a term project in mind and I will seek to match your research interests to the subject matter of the remaining weeks of the class – by having you facilitate discussion of material related to your paper, or by otherwise drawing upon your interests as the class goes on. In order to do this, I will need regular feedback from you on how your research is going or on ideas you have that might

be of use in the class. So not only should you participate in class, but you should keep in touch with me outside of class, by stopping by (virtually) during office hours or by emailing me when you have questions or comments.

As many of you know, this class is closely related to my own research interests. I am happy to discuss my own work with you during the course. For the most part, though, you should see me as someone who can help you construct your own research projects. I have used many of the data sources the class draws upon and have drawn on many of the books we are reading here in my own work. During our discussions about research strategies I am happy to work with each of you to discuss where to find information and what to do with it once you've found it. Finally, I do want to note that I am not a fan of three hour, once-a-week courses. Three hours is far too long for most people to keep a sustained focus on one subject. As you'll notice in the weekly schedule, we will often break the class time into two or three discrete sections. If you are the discussion facilitator for a given week, you will not have to run the discussion for the whole class. We will also make sure to spend part of each class session discussing ways of doing research on the week's topic.

### *Requirements and Grading*

The primary piece of work in this class will be a research paper of approximately 25 double-spaced pages on a topic of your choice. The topic should be related to the course material and should draw upon the course material, but it should also entail a substantial amount of independent research.

The research paper will have several components. It should include a clear research question and set of hypotheses; a literature review; a response to your research question; and an explanation of the normative consequences of your project. We will work through each of these components in class. The paper's literature review should include at least 8-10 sources, including (depending on your question), primary sources, books, scholarly articles, or news accounts. In your final paper you must cite these sources correctly and include a bibliography. The nature of the response to the question will be dictated by the nature of the question itself; some of you may ask questions that require the collection of quantitative data, some may ask questions that can be answered through a set of interviews, and others may ask questions that lend themselves to one or more case studies. When you develop your research question, you should do so with a basic understanding of the material you will need to gather in order to answer it.

You should begin work on your paper early in the semester. There are several deadlines you will need to keep in mind. Your proposal, which will include a one-page discussion of your question and strategy for answering it, and a preliminary list of resources, will be due March 19. A rough draft –which will include a complete literature review and the beginnings of an effort to answer your research question –will be due May 17 or 24. The final project will be due on the last day of the final exam period. Your research paper will be worth 40% of your grade, and the presentation of your draft work will be worth another 20%.

*Reaction Papers:* Each of the first twelve weeks of the semester you will prepare a one-page reaction paper. In this paper you will (a) discuss your thoughts on one major claim in the week's reading that you find of interest; and (b) outline the evidence we would need to test this claim. These short essays will be due through Moodle on the Sunday night before each class. You will post an abbreviated version of the paper on the week's Moodle chat forum by 6:00 pm Sunday, and respond to another student's post by 9:00 am Monday. I will use these papers and Moodle posts to structure discussion. These reaction papers will collectively be worth 30% of your grade.

*Attendance and Participation:* The most important requirement for this class is your attendance and participation. In order to succeed in this course, you must attend class and you must come prepared to discuss the readings. Attendance and participation comprise 10% of your grade. The grade will be given at my discretion, based on my observation of your engagement in the class, your attendance, and your command of the material.

*Summary:* Class Requirements and Percent Contribution to Final Grade:

Requirement	Percent Contribution to Grade	Objective
Class participation and attendance	10%	Understanding of material
Reaction Papers	30%	Critical analysis of class material
Research Paper	40%	Ability to conduct research
Research Presentation	20%	Ability to explain and defend research

Like most Clark courses, this class is worth four credit hours. That means that I expect you to commit approximately twelve hours of your time to the class each week, or 180 hours for the full semester. In addition to the three hours of class time per week, you should expect that the reading will take you four to five hours per week, the writing assignments or exam preparation will take an average of one hour per week, and the research projects will take an average of three hours per week. The amount of time you spend on each of these activities will, of course, vary from one week to the next.

## *COVID-19, Academic Continuity and Online Participation*

This class will be conducted in compliance with the Healthy Clark COVID guidelines, available at <https://www.clarku.edu/healthy-clark-covid-plan/>. I encourage you to familiarize yourself with these guidelines. It is my hope that we will be able to conduct this class in person. We do, however, have a contingent of students taking the class on line, so all classes will be on Zoom. If you are one of the in-person participants, but are feeling ill, for any reason, you should take the class remotely. I don't know that I will be able to integrate the online students into the in-person conversations, but I will make sure to set up some online discussions, either during the class session or at another time.

You should also be sure to get the required books for the class early, in case the semester is disrupted. Please note, in addition, that faculty are unable to have in-person office hours. I am happy to meet with you and should have plenty of time during the week to do so, but all meetings with me will need to be conducted via Zoom unless you wish to speak immediately before or after class.

For those of you attending in person, please observe the following rules:

- 1) If you have not kept up on your COVID-19 testing requirements, do not come to class. If you have any symptoms, feel ill in any manner, or have been in contact with someone who has COVID do not come to class. I will make sure there are resources that will allow you to catch up on whatever you have missed.
- 2) Wear a mask and wear it properly.
- 3) Please arrive at the classroom as close as possible to the start time for class such that we minimize any congregating outside the doors. There is no currently scheduled class before ours, so if you are early, please go on in; don't congregate in the hallway.
- 4) When you enter, sanitize your hands at the hand sanitizer station, then go to the chair/table across the room where you will find disinfectant spray bottles and wipes that you should use to clean the desk and armrests on the seat you will be sitting in for that day. Return the spray bottle to the table when you are finished with it. Cleaning will take a few minutes but it is essential for maintaining as sanitary an environment as is possible.
- 5) You will have an assigned seat for the duration of the semester – whatever seat you choose on the first day will be your seat for all subsequent classes. There are a total of 12 available seats for students in the classroom. It is important that you stay in the same seat – this will enable me to get to know who is who (it's hard to identify people when they have masks on) and it will be important for contact tracing should that become necessary.
- 6) Food is not allowed at any time in the classroom. You may drink liquids but please do so with quick sips to minimize the length of time that your mask is down.
- 7) Please refrain from bathroom breaks during class, but if you need to leave the room you will need to re-sanitize your hands when you return.
- 8) When class is over, please maintain social distancing and exit single file through the exit only door near the front of the classroom. And please exit as efficiently as possible so that the class that follows ours has sufficient time to settle in. There currently are no classes scheduled after ours, so if you have brief questions for me I am happy to talk after class.

## *Academic Honesty*

Finally, as you should be aware by now, the work you do in this course must be entirely your own. To be sure we all have the same understanding of academic integrity as it pertains to this course, here is what the Academic Advising *Blue Book* (p. 22) has to say on the subject:

Academic integrity is highly valued at Clark. Research, scholarship and teaching are possible only in an environment characterized by honesty and mutual trust. Academic integrity requires that your work be your own. Because of the damage that violations of academic integrity do to the intellectual climate of the University, they must be treated with the utmost seriousness and appropriate sanctions must be imposed. The maintenance of high standards of academic integrity is the concern of every member of the University community.

**Plagiarism** refers to the presentation of someone else's work as one's own, without proper citation of references and sources, whether or not the work has been previously published. Submitting work obtained from a professional term paper writer or company is plagiarism. Claims of ignorance about the rules of attribution, or of unintentional error are not a defense against a finding of plagiarism.

Suspected plagiarism cases will be referred to the Dean's office. If you are in doubt about whether you have provided adequate citation or used others' work properly, please talk with me before handing your paper in!

## Schedule

### I. Perspectives on Democratic Reform

February 22 (on line): Democratic Erosion: The US in Comparative Perspective

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*

Sean Illing, “The Central Weakness of our Political System Right Now is the Republican Party” (Interview with Daniel Ziblatt). *Vox*, January 13, 2021. On line, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22151075/trump-republican-party-american-democracy-daniel-ziblatt>.

February 25, 12:00: Voter Suppression & the Power of the Black Vote: A HECCMA Lunch & Learn with Danielle Allen (Professor of Political Science and Director of the Safra Center for Ethics, Harvard University). Register at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSf-7WyAR38f4I0CpTd418UUFrjirJqkSsZIXDTfYCaoQ4yL1Q/viewform> or <https://engage.clarku.edu/event/6910299>

March 1 (on line): A Liberal/Progressive Approach to Reform

Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized*

Ezra Klein, “Democrats, Here’s how to Lose in 2022. And Deserve it.” *New York Times*, January 21, 2021. On line, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/opinion/biden-inauguration-democrats.html?referringSource=articleShare>.

March 8 (on line): A Conservative Approach to Reform

Special guest: Greg Weiner, Associate Professor of Political Science, Assumption College

Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build*

Kevin Kosar, “The Political Right Needs to Change Course on Elections Reform.”

*American Enterprise Institute*, February 1, 2021. On line,

<https://www.aei.org/politics-and-public-opinion/the-political-right-needs-to-change-course-on-elections-reform/>.

March 15: Pluralist Skepticism of Reform

Bruce Cain, *Democracy More or Less: America’s Political Reform Quandary*

March 17, 7:00 PM: Political Science Department Harrington Lecture: Susan Stokes, Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago; Director, [Chicago Center on Democracy](#): “Is ‘Direct Democracy’ Good for Democracy? The Logic(s) of Referendums.”

➔ Research Paper proposals due Friday March 19

## II. Election Reform

March 22: Political Parties

Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop*

Optional:

Various interviews (audio and video) on the book, at <http://leedrutman.org/>.

March 29: The Presidency and the Electoral College

Jesse Wegman, *Let the People Pick the President*

Gary Gregg, “The Electoral College and American Liberty.” *Law & Liberty*, August 20, 2012. On line, <https://lawliberty.org/the-electoral-college-and-american-liberty/>.

Robert Boatright, “Despite Cries to Scrap the Electoral College, it May not be so Bad for Dems.” *The Hill*, April 4, 2019. On line, <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/437394-despite-cries-to-scrap-electoral-college-it-may-not-be-so-bad-for-dems>.

April 5: Reform Potpourri: Campaign Finance, Redistricting, Primary Elections

Bipartisan Policy Center, “The State of Campaign Finance in the U.S.” On line,

<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPC-Democracy-Campaign-Finance-in-the-United-States.pdf>

Justin Levitt, “A Citizen’s Guide to Redistricting” (2010 edition). On line,

<https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/CGR%20Reprint%20Single%20Page.pdf>.

Robert Boatright, *Congressional Primary Elections* (New York: Routledge, 2014), ch.8 (available on Moodle).

J. Andrew Sinclair and Ian O’Grady, “Beyond Open and Closed: Complexity in American Primary Election Reform” and Michael S. Kang and Barry C. Burden, “Sore Loser Laws in Presidential and Congressional Elections,” both in *Routledge Handbook of Primary Elections*, ed. Robert Boatright (New York, Routledge, 2018), ch. 25-26 (available on Moodle).



### III. Institutional Reform

April 12: The Presidency

Howell and Moe, *Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy*

Bob Bauer and Jack Goldsmith, *After Trump* (Washington, DC: Lawfare, 2020), excerpts (available on Moodle).

Optional:

Jack Goldsmith, “Reconstructing the Presidency After Trump” (Interview, November 4, 2020). On line, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/02/930381440/reconstructing-the-presidency-after-trump>

April 19: Congress

Special Guests (3:00, by Zoom): Kevin Esterling, Professor of Public Policy and Political Science; Director, Laboratory for Technology, Communication and Democracy, University of California Riverside (member of the APSA Presidential Task Force on Congressional Reform).

Marci Harris, PopVox

Claire Abernathy, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Stockton University

Special Guest (4:00, by Zoom): James Wallner, R Street Institute

APSA Presidential Task Force on Congressional Reform, Final Report. On line, <https://www.legbranch.org/app/uploads/2019/11/APSA-Congressional-Reform-Task-Force-Report-11-2019-1.pdf>

Molly Reynolds, “Making Congress a Better Place to Work.” Brookings Institution, February 10, 2021. On line, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/making-congress-a-better-place-to-work/>.

Gregory Koger, *Filibustering* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 189-200. (available on Moodle)

James Wallner, “Speaking up for the Filibuster,” *Law and Liberty*, August 17, 2020. On line, <https://lawliberty.org/speaking-up-for-the-filibuster/>.

Data for Progress, “The Senate is an Unredeemable Institution.” New York: Data for Progress, December 2019. On line, <https://filesforprogress.org/memos/the-senate-is-an-irredeemable-institution.pdf>.

Tom Downey, “Why 435?” *Democracy* 55 (Winter 2015). On line, <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/55/why-435/>

Optional:

Brookings Institution, *Debating the Future of the Filibuster* (video webinar, January 22, 2021). [https://www.brookings.edu/events/debating-the-future-of-the-filibuster/?utm\\_campaign=Governance%20Studies&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=108366095&utm\\_source=hs\\_email](https://www.brookings.edu/events/debating-the-future-of-the-filibuster/?utm_campaign=Governance%20Studies&utm_medium=email&utm_content=108366095&utm_source=hs_email)

Adam Jentleson, “The Racist History of the Senate Filibuster” (interview, January 12, 2021). On line, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/12/956018064/the-racist-history-of-the-senate-filibuster>

April 26: Fake News, Conspiracy Theories, Social Media, and “Big Tech”  
Special Guest (by Zoom): Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, Professor of Communications, University of Delaware

Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People are Saying*  
Nate Persily, “The Internet’s Challenge to Democracy” (Geneva, Kofi Annan Foundation, 2021). On line, [https://storage.googleapis.com/kofiannanfoundation.org/2019/02/a6112278-190206\\_kaf\\_democracy\\_internet\\_persily\\_single\\_pages\\_v3.pdf](https://storage.googleapis.com/kofiannanfoundation.org/2019/02/a6112278-190206_kaf_democracy_internet_persily_single_pages_v3.pdf).

#### **IV. Reforming our Civic Culture**

May 3: The Role of Politics in our Lives  
Special Guest (by Zoom): Robert Talisse, Professor of Philosophy, Vanderbilt University

Robert Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*

Optional:  
“Half Hour of Heterodoxy” (interview with Talisse), November 1, 2019. On line, <https://heterodoxacademy.org/podcast/episode-71-robert-talisse-overdoing-democracy/>

May 10: How we do Politics  
Special Guest (by Zoom): Eitan Hersh, Professor of Political Science, Tufts University

Eitan Hersh, *Politics is for Power*

May 17: Student Symposium I  
May 24: Student Symposium II

➔ June 4: Research Paper due