

PS 102: American Politics and Policy—In Defense of Democracy Summer Session

Instructor: Hakeem Jefferson
Email: hakeem@stanford.edu
Office Hours: By appointment

COURSE FORMAT

This course meets twice per week for two-hour class sessions. Class meetings will combine lecture, discussion, and applied or practitioner-focused conversations.

The course is designed to mirror the structure and expectations of PS 102 as taught during the academic year. In addition to the regular class meetings, the course may include a discussion section led by a teaching assistant, consistent with enrollment levels. If a section is offered, it will meet weekly and will focus on discussion of course readings and themes.

COURSE OVERVIEW

American democracy faces a series of unprecedented challenges. This course will identify the greatest areas of weakness in the American political system, make sense of the most pressing threats facing democracy, and contemplate how democracy can be strengthened. With this theme—in defense of democracy—in mind, we will examine several questions: What guiding principles, norms, and institutions organize and structure American politics, and how do they affect the health and effectiveness of American democracy? What do patterns of political participation and representation in the United States tell us about the health of our democracy? How do partisan and social identities breed hostility and antagonism among the mass public? How does information from the media and other sources advance or distort democratic outcomes? What does increased violence—political, racially motivated, or otherwise—reveal about the trajectory of democracy in the United States? This course aims to bring the scientific study of politics to bear on these pressing questions.

Several class sessions will include applied or practitioner-focused conversations connected to course themes. Specific speakers are subject to availability.

COURSE MATERIALS

There is no required textbook. All readings will be available on Canvas or linked through the syllabus.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

Analytical Memos (2 total, 750–1,000 words each) — 40%

Students will complete two short analytical memos over the course of the term. These memos ask students to engage closely with course readings, lectures, and discussions, and to develop clear, well-supported arguments about central themes in the course. Each memo will require students to identify a core democratic problem, analyze it using concepts and evidence from the course, and articulate its broader implications.

Due dates will be announced during the first week of class.

Final Policy or Reform Memo — 40%

The final assignment for this course is a policy or reform memo proposing an intervention designed to strengthen democratic governance in the United States. Drawing on course materials, students will be asked to:

- identify a pressing challenge facing American democracy;
- describe a policy, institutional reform, or governance strategy that addresses this challenge;
- assess the feasibility and potential tradeoffs of the proposed intervention; and
- reflect on its implications for democratic resilience.

Students may focus on institutions, participation, information, inequality, or state power. Additional details and expectations will be posted on Canvas.

Participation and Engagement — 20%

Students are expected to attend all class meetings regularly and to participate actively in discussions. Because this is an intensive summer course, consistent attendance and engagement are essential. A substantial portion of the participation grade will be based on attendance and participation during class meetings. Sign-in sheets may be used to track attendance.

If the course includes a discussion section led by a teaching assistant, students will be expected to attend all section meetings and to participate actively. Attendance and participation in section will count toward the overall participation grade.

HONOR CODE

Students are responsible for understanding and upholding the [University's Honor Code policy](#) and must make proper use of citations of sources for writing papers, creating, presenting, and performing their work, taking examinations, and conducting research.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated

in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://oae.stanford.edu>).

Course Schedule and Readings

Readings and session formats are subject to adjustment.

Week 1 — Democracy in Crisis

Session 1: What Is Democracy, and Why Is It Fragile?

Required

Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*, Chapter 1 (or NPR *Fresh Air* interview, 2018).

Bright Line Watch. “Confidence in American Democracy” (most recent report).

Session 2: Applied Conversation — The Democratic Crisis in Contemporary U.S. Politics

Required

The Declaration of Independence

Douglass, Frederick. “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”

Podcast: <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/policycast/if-you-dont-have-multiracial-democracy-you-dont-have-democracy-all>

Week 2 — Institutions, Power, and Democratic Constraint

Session 1: Institutions, Veto Points, and Minority Rule

Required

Weingast, Barry. “The Political Foundations of Democracy and the Rule of Law.”

Fukuyama, Francis. “The Decay of American Political Institutions.”

Session 2: Practitioner Conversation — Governing Within Democratic Institutions

Required

Grumbach, Jacob. “Laboratories of Democratic Backsliding.” *American Political Science Review*

Week 3 — Voting, Participation, and Democratic Inclusion

Session 1: Participation, Power, and the Politics of the Vote

Required

Shelby County v. Holder (2013)

Majority opinion (Roberts) — skim

Dissent (Ginsburg) — skim

Hopkins, Daniel. “What We Know About Voter ID Laws.”

Session 2: Practitioner Conversation — Election Administration and Voting Rights

Required

Rao, et al. “Is America a Democracy? Why It Denies Millions the Vote.”

Week 4 — Courts, Law, and Countermajoritarian Power

Session 1: Judicial Review and Democratic Legitimacy

Required

Bonica, Adam, and Maya Sen. *The Judicial Tug of War*, Chapters 2–3.

Bowie, Nikolas. “The Contemporary Debate over Supreme Court Reform.”

Session 2: Practitioner Conversation — Courts, Law, and Democratic Authority

Vladeck, Steve. Interview on the Supreme Court’s shadow docket (Law Dork).

Week 5 — Polarization, Identity, and Democratic Conflict

Session 1: Affective Polarization and Political Hostility

Required

Iyengar, Shanto, and Sean Westwood. “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines.”

Kalmoe, Nathan, and Liliana Mason. “Political Violence in the United States.”

Session 2: Applied Conversation — Can We All Just Get Along?

Required

Pew Research Center. “The Partisan Divide on Political Values.”

Kreiss, Daniel, and Shannon C McGregor. “A Review and Provocation: On Polarization and Platforms”

Week 6 — Media, Information, and Democratic Distortion

Session 1: Media Incentives, Selective Exposure, and Political Knowledge

Required

Mendelberg, Tali. “Executing Hortons.”

Martin, Gregory, and Joshua McCrain. “Local News, National Politics.”

Session 2: Practitioner Conversation — Media, Platforms, and Democratic Distortion

Required

Douek, Evelyn. “The Rise of Content Cartels.” (*Skim*)

Week 7 — Inequality, Race, Immigration, and Democratic Power

Session 1: Race, Immigration, and State Power

Required

Prouse, Gwen, and Vesla Weaver. “Racial Authoritarianism in U.S. Democracy.”

Jefferson, Hakeem et. al. “Beyond the Ballot Box: A Conversation about Democracy and Policing in the United States.”

Session 2: Practitioner Conversation — Immigration Enforcement, State Violence, and Democratic Accountability

Required

American Immigration Council. “Immigration Detention Expansion in Trump’s Second Term.”

Week 8 — Democratic Futures and Reform

Session 1: Democratic Repair and Institutional Reform

Required

Blackwell, Angela Glover. “How We Achieve a Multiracial Democracy.”

Ray, Victor, and Hakeem Jefferson. “White Backlash Is a Type of Racial Reckoning, Too.”

Session 2: Capstone Session — What Does Defending Democracy Require?

No readings. Integrative discussion and synthesis.