

# **POL 212-01: POLITICAL PARTIES**

Washington & Jefferson College  
Fall 2023  
Mondays, Wednesdays, & Fridays 1:00 – 2:10 PM  
Old Main 207

*Instructor:* Joel B. Kersting, Ph.D. (Pronouns: he/him/his)

*Email:* [jkersting@washjeff.edu](mailto:jkersting@washjeff.edu)

*Phone:* 724-503-1001 x 6182

*Office:* Old Main 209A

*Office Hours:* Tuesdays & Thursdays 11:00 AM – 12:00 PM; or by appointment

## **CATALOG DESCRIPTION**

---

A study of party organization, operation, and underlying assumptions in modern democratic societies, the emphasis is on the American party system.

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

---

This is a course that explores one of the primary institutions we use to organize our political behavior in the United States: the political party. In the beginning of the course, we will first weigh the value of political parties in a democratic system and how political parties change, both in terms of the coalitions they represent and the issue positions they advocate for. We will learn about key historical changes in the American party system and what the two major parties look like in contemporary America.

We will spend significant time considering which political actors drive party behavior: elected officials, partisan activists, or everyday voters. Using the tripartite framework of political parties, we will look at the role of parties in American government, how American party organizations function, and how voters align themselves with a political party.

In the second half of the course, explain why America is a two-party system; and how other countries party systems differ from America. We will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different electoral rules and party systems. Finally, we will consider the extreme polarization observed between the Democratic and Republican parties today, both its causes and its effects.

Beyond the substantive knowledge of political parties provided in this course, you will be provided with ample opportunity to engage with scholarly research, both by reading and discussing research on political parties; and by conducting your own research projects on political parties.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

---

After taking this course, students will be able to:

1. Describe the purpose and function of political parties in American democracy.
2. Explain why the United States has a two-party system; and compare party systems across countries.
3. Illustrate how political parties organize the legislative process, elections, and other political behavior.
4. Explain how and why political party coalitions and positions change; and describe how the American party system changed over time and what it looks like today.
5. Explain the causes and consequences of partisan polarization in American politics.
6. Read and analyze political science research.
7. Participate in rigorous academic discussions.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

---

**Exams:** There will be three exams in this course. These exams will *not* be cumulative; and **the lowest exam grade will be dropped**. These exams will consist of a combination of objective questions and short essays. A review sheet for each exam will be made available at least one week before the date of the exam. If you happen to be absent from class on one of the exam days and provided it is an excusable absence (See Attendance policy below), we can schedule a makeup exam. If you anticipate being absent for one of the exams, please let me know as soon as possible. (40%)

**Assignments:** There are four assignments in this course, of varying length and complexity:

1. *Why Parties? Reflection:* You will write a brief 2-page reflection advancing an argument about what the purpose and nature of political parties should be. (5%)
2. *Party Position Taking Memo:* You will write a 4-5 page memo describing and explaining party position change on an issue of your choice. (10%)
3. *Party System Comparison Outline:* To help prepare you to write the party system comparison paper, you will complete an outline which will require you to research another country's party system and domestic politics. (5%)
4. *Party System Comparison Paper:* You will write a 7-8 page paper comparing another country's party system with the U.S. party system. You will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each system on the qualities of stability, efficiency, and representation. (20%)

Detailed guidelines for each of these assignments will be distributed as the semester progresses; and we will discuss these assignments together in class beforehand.

**Attendance:** You are expected to be present for every class meeting. My expectations for your intellectual growth in this course are high. When you are not present, you are unable to partake in that growth. **Everyone receives three free excused absences.** You do not need to notify me of these absences in advance. Students unable to attend class because of illness should contact Student Health Services. **If you feel ill, please do not come to class.** Students unable to attend class because of a family or other

emergency should contact the Office of Student Life. If there is a reason for an ongoing absence in this class, please discuss this with me as soon as possible. (5%)

**Participation:** You will be expected to fully participate in class discussion. Actively engaging with the course material through discussion with fellow students is crucial to your understanding of the material. As a rule of thumb, you should be speaking, on average, at least once per class to receive a B for participation. Speaking more than this will ensure a higher grade. Conversely, if you habitually fail to contribute to class discussion, you can expect your participation grade to decrease. (15%)

#### **Grade Determination:**

<b>Component</b>	<b>Worth</b>
Exams	40%
Why Parties? Reflection	5%
Party Position Taking Memo	10%
Party System Comparison Outline	5%
Party System Comparison Paper	20%
Attendance	5%
Participation	15%

At the end of the course, your grade will be assigned based on the following scale: A (93-100); A- (90-92); B+ (87-89); B (83-86); B- (80-82); C+ (77-79); C (73-76); C- (70-72); D (66-69); and F (0-65).

## **COURSE POLICIES**

---

**Late Assignment Policy:** You are expected to submit all assignments by the due dates listed on the syllabus. Late assignments can be submitted after the due date with a grade penalty. The final grade for the assignment will be lowered by a third of a letter grade for every 24 hours the assignment is late. **Assignments submitted more than a week after the due date will not be accepted for credit.**

Extensions on assignments can be granted providing two criteria are met: (1) there is a legitimate excuse for the assignment not being submitted on time (e.g. documented illness or personal emergency); and (2) you request the extension before the assignment is due.

**Classroom Culture:** For this course to be fully successful, I expect two things from each student. First, I expect active engagement in classroom discussion. While much time will be devoted to class lectures on the material, there will always be time devoted each class for group discussion on the topics we have discussed that day. Relatedly, I expect you to have completed the readings and to be prepared to discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented in the texts. Our discussions will draw from those theoretical debates. Participation accounts for 10% of your total grade, so it is in your best interest to come prepared for class. A firm grasp of the literature will serve you well in preparation for exams in this class and in crafting a firm foundation for further classes in political science.

While preparing to discuss the course material, I suggest you read (or at least scan) a newspaper once a day. Since this is a class on politics, it is especially important to keep up on current events since they are often

direct results of the political system we will be examining. W&J has an online subscription to the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. Information for accessing these newspapers can be found in the following links: [NYT](#), [WaPo](#), and [WSJ](#).

We will occasionally discuss issues that are controversial or polarizing. This is an intrinsic part of the political process, and, as such, it will certainly be a part of our discussions. While it is by no means wrong to hold an opinion on controversial issues, I expect and require civility in discussions. Hateful comments will not be tolerated and will be grounds for dismissal from the class session.

A key part of academic discussion is treating your classmates and the instructor with respect. Respect not only pertains to what you are contributing to class discussion, but also how you listen to what your classmates and the instructor are saying. I expect you to be an active listener during class discussions.

**Technology:** In my experience as an instructor, I have found that while some students may benefit from using technology in the classroom, there are also many students who abuse the privilege of technology use. **Laptop and tablet use for class purposes is permitted in this course, but this is a privilege. If I habitually observe students abusing this privilege, I reserve the right to prohibit all technology use.** Relatedly, cell phone use is prohibited in this course. If I observe you using your phone during a class, you will receive no participation credit for that day.

**Contacting the Instructor:** The best way to get in contact with me is through email ([jkersting@washjeff.edu](mailto:jkersting@washjeff.edu)). I do my best to reply to all student emails within 24 hours and typically my replies will be much sooner than that. That being said: do not email me at midnight and expect a timely answer.

If your questions or concerns are substantial in nature, it is best to meet with me in person rather than engage in a lengthy email exchange. I have regular office hours listed above, but if those times do not work for you, please feel free to schedule an appointment with me.

**Counseling Services:** As a college student, there may be times when personal stressors interfere with your academic performance and/or negatively impact your daily life. If you or someone you know is experiencing mental health challenges at W&J, please contact Student Health & Counseling at 724-223-6107. Their services are free and confidential. In a crisis situation, or after hours, contact Campus Safety at 724-223-6032 and ask for the psychologist on-call or call the Washington County Crisis line at 877-225-3567.

**Disability Support Services:** Washington & Jefferson College is committed to providing academic accommodations for students with disabilities. This includes individuals with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health disorders that meet the definition of a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Students who plan to request accommodations should contact the Director for Academic Success as early as possible, although requests may be made at any time. To determine whether you qualify for accommodations, or if you have questions about services and procedures, please call 724-223-6008 or send an email to [dss@washjeff.edu](mailto:dss@washjeff.edu).

**Academic Honesty:** Washington & Jefferson College is a community dedicated to the intellectual and personal development of its students. Such development may be achieved in many ways, including creating original works of writing, art, and music; conducting research; engaging in discussions; taking examinations; and participation in co-curricular activities. Central to such developmental activities is that whatever a student represents as being the fruit of his or her own intellectual labor is indeed his or her own. Otherwise, the

student will not only have acted dishonestly, but will also have wasted the developmental opportunities afforded by the College. W&J upholds academic honesty in the College community by pursuing cases of academic misconduct. When such academic misconduct is discovered, the College will ensure through the imposition of appropriate penalties that the student does not gain unfair advantage through his or her dishonesty and will help the student address the concerns that led to the offense. If the nature of the intellectual dishonesty is determined to be conscious, calculated and/or intentional, or if academic misconduct recurs, the student may be judged to be incapable of benefiting to a satisfactory degree from the developmental opportunities afforded by the College, and may then be permanently dismissed so that the College's resources may be directed to deserving students.

**AI/LLM Use Policy:** In an academic context, plagiarism is the act of presenting someone else's work as one's own. Presenting the output of an automated tool (artificial intelligence or machine learning tools such as ChatGPT or Dall-E 2) as one's own work is misrepresentation of the work of the engineers and scientists who developed the tool and of the creators and owners of the significant body of data (text, images, etc.) upon which the model was trained. **Students are not allowed to use advanced automated tools on assignments in this course. Each student is expected to complete each assignment without substantive assistance from others, including automated tools.** Use of these tools to complete coursework will result grade penalties and an academic integrity violation.

## TEXTBOOK AND READINGS

---

The required text for this course is **Political Parties** (ISBN: 978-0393938081) by Seth Masket and Hans Noel. It is available through the W&J bookstore and online. All other course readings will be posted online for your use. Readings are to be completed BEFORE the class meeting for which they are listed.

## COURSE SCHEDULE

---

(Subject to change)

Meeting	Topic	Readings/ Assignments
Wed. Aug. 23	Course Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Syllabus</li></ul>
Fri. Aug. 25	What are parties?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 1</li></ul>
Mon. Aug. 28	Who controls parties: Politicians?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Aldrich: Excerpt from <i>Why Parties?</i> (1995)</li></ul>
Wed. Aug. 30	Who controls parties: Activists?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Cohen et al.: Excerpt from <i>The Party Decides</i> (2008)</li></ul>
Fri. Sept. 1	Who controls parties: Both?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Hilton: Excerpt from <i>True Blues</i> (2021)</li></ul>

Meeting	Topic	Readings/ Assignments
Mon. Sept. 4	<b>NO CLASS – LABOR DAY</b>	
Wed. Sept. 6	<b>NO CLASS</b>	<b>Why Parties? Reflection due at class time</b>
Fri. Sept. 8	American Party History & Realignments 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 2</li> </ul>
Mon. Sept. 11	American Party History & Realignments 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Harris: “America is Divided by Education” (2018)</li> </ul>
Wed. Sept. 13	Party Position Change: Theory 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Karol: <i>Party Position Change in American Politics</i> Chapter 1 (2009)</li> </ul>
Fri. Sept. 15	Party Position Change: Theory 2	
Mon. Sept. 18	Party Position Taking Memo Workshop	
Wed. Sept. 20	Exam 1 Review	
Fri. Sept. 22	Exam 1	
Mon. Sept. 25	Party-in-Government: Congress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 3</li> </ul>
Wed. Sept. 27	Party-in-Government: Congress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Curry &amp; Lee: <i>The Limits of Party</i> Chapter 1 (2020)</li> </ul>
Fri. Sept. 29	Party-in-Government: Presidency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 4</li> </ul>
Mon. Oct. 2	Party Organizations: Formal Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 7 pp. 169-180</li> </ul>
Wed. Oct. 4	Party Organizations: Activists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 8 pp. 192-211</li> </ul>

Meeting	Topic	Readings/ Assignments
Fri. Oct. 6	Party Organizations: Party Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grossmann &amp; Hopkins: "Ideological Republicans and Group-Interest Democrats" (2015)</li> </ul>
Mon. Oct. 9	Party Organizations: Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Frymer: <i>Uneasy Alliances</i> Chapter 1</li> </ul> <b>Party Position Taking Memo due</b>
Wed. Oct. 11	Party Organizations: Nominations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 9 pp. 239-247</li> </ul>
Fri. Oct. 13	Party Organizations: Presidential Nominations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 10</li> </ul>
Mon. Oct. 16	<b>NO CLASS – FALL BREAK</b>	
Wed. Oct. 18	Exam 2 Review	
Fri. Oct. 20	Exam 2	
Mon. Oct. 23	Party-in-Electorate: What do voters do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 12</li> </ul>
Wed. Oct. 25	Party-in-Electorate: Partisanship	
Fri. Oct. 27	Party-in-Electorate: Partisanship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Green, Palmquist, &amp; Schickler: Excerpt from <i>Partisan Hearts and Minds</i> (2002)</li> </ul>
Mon. Oct. 30	Party Systems: Duverger's Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 5 pp. 96-106</li> </ul>
Wed. Nov. 1	Party Systems: Electoral Rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 5 pp. 106-116</li> </ul>
Fri. Nov. 3	Party Systems: Choosing Candidates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 5 pp. 116-121</li> </ul>
Mon. Nov. 6	Party Systems: Parliaments & Coalitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Masket &amp; Noel: <i>Political Parties</i> Chapter 5 pp. 121-129</li> </ul>

Meeting	Topic	Readings/ Assignments
Wed. Nov. 8	Evaluating Party Systems	
Fri. Nov. 10	Reforming the System? 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drutman: <i>Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop</i> Chapter 8 (2020)</li> </ul>
Mon. Nov. 13	Reforming the System? 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drutman: <i>Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop</i> Chapter 9 (2020)</li> </ul>
Wed. Nov. 15	Paper Outline Workshop	
Fri. Nov. 17	Polarization: Why is it happening?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Klein: <i>Why We're Polarized</i> Chapter 1 (2020)</li> </ul>
Mon. Nov. 20	TBA	<b>Party System Comparison Outline due</b>
Wed. Nov. 22	<b>NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING</b>	
Fri. Nov. 24	<b>NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING</b>	
Mon. Nov. 27	Polarization: Why is it happening?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Klein: <i>Why We're Polarized</i> Chapter 2 (2020)</li> </ul>
Wed. Nov. 29	Paper Workshop	
Fri. Dec. 1	Future of Party Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Azari: "Weak Parties &amp; Strong Partisanship" (2016)</li> </ul>
Mon. Dec. 4	Exam 3 Review	<b>Party System Comparison Paper due</b>
Mon. Dec. 11	Exam 3	<b>Exam Time: 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM</b>