

GOVT 490 - 005: U.S. Democracy in Crisis

Jennifer N. Victor, Ph.D.

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E-mail: jvictor3@gmu.edu

Twitter: [@jennifernvictor](https://twitter.com/jennifernvictor)

Class Hours: T/Th 10:30 a.m. - 11:45 a.m.

Office Hours (in person): T/TH 1:30 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.

Office Hours (virtual): [virtual scheduler link](#)

Web: jvictor.gmu.edu

Course website: [blackboard.gmu.edu](#)

Classroom: Horizon Hall 3010

Office: Aquia Hall 325

(document updated January 20, 2022)

Course Description

A bit more than a year out from a violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol aimed at disrupting or overturning a free election, the U.S. government remains intact. While millions of Americans doubt the legitimacy of the 2020 election, millions more remain steadfast to the Constitution, which was ultimately enforced despite attempts by the former president to undermine it. What does all of this mean for the future of U.S. democracy? Is it now in crisis, or has it passed its latest stress test and showcased its resilience? This course is designed to examine this question using systematic evidence from political science and related fields. We will examine what it means to be a democracy, evaluate the history of U.S. democratic institutions, and identify historical and existing vulnerabilities of democracy. We will examine the roles of federalism, media, social media, political parties, campaign finance, racial bias, systemic racism, and local politics in stagnating and perpetuating democracy in the U.S. In the second half of the semester, students will have the opportunity to take a deep-dive on reform proposals for U.S. government and try to convince their classmates about which ones are worthwhile and which ones are not.

Course Objectives

There are two primary goals for this course. First, students should gain a firm understanding of the pillars and frailties of U.S. democracy. Which institutions, norms, or values are necessary for protecting American freedoms and rights, and which are desirable? This understanding comes from engaging deeply with the history and theory of U.S. government, with an appreciation for its nuances. Students need to have an open mind and be willing to question what they think they already know about U.S. history, government, and politics.

Second, students will practice and improve their critical thinking, writing, and research skills in this class. Students will have a heavy reading load, which is necessary to begin to dissect the voluminous literature in this field. Students will also actively engage with one another in research, presentations, and writing assignments.

Course Format

This course is being taught in-person and may not be completed in hybrid fashion. Students are required to have received a full course of COVID-19 vaccinations, including a booster shot (ideally,

at least two weeks before the start of class). In addition to following state, county, and university health policies, the class may vary policies and expectations regarding masks or other mitigation strategies depending on current data. If students experience health or other personal emergencies during the course, they must communicate their situation and needs with the instructor, who will work with you to devise a contingency plan for completing the course.

Course Policies

Graded Components

- *Quick Writes 15%* Each class, students will be presented with a writing prompt related to the reading assignment for the week. Students will spend 10 - 20 minutes composing a handwritten response to the prompt, then participating in a brief peer-review session where students will provide feedback to their peers in anonymous fashion. These activities are designed to hold students accountable for class attendance and reading assignments, as well as to build writing skills. Students may reference texts and notes during Quick Writes. The lowest *three* Quick Writes scores will be excluded from the course grade. Missed Quick Writes cannot be made-up or submitted late (except under extraordinary circumstances).
- *Midterm exam 20%* There will be an open book, in-class, midterm exam on **Thursday, March 10**.
- *Reform position papers (X3) 30%* Students will each write three different essays in which they use logic and evidence to advocate for or against a proposed government reform found in the wild. **Students select their own topics and positions.** Essays should be 1,000 - 1,200 words, excluding references, titles, tables, and graphs. Students should use APSA citation style including in-text parenthetical citations and a complete bibliography. Essays will be due on **February 24, March 31, and April 28**, by midnight.
- *Reform proposal project 20%* As a part of a 2 - 3 person self-selected group, students will develop an advocacy campaign for or against a government reform assigned to them. **Student teams will not select their position (for or against); positions will be randomly assigned by the instructor.** The campaign must include:
 1. One co-authored **essay** of 1,500 - 2,000 words (6-8 pages), excluding references, titles, tables, and graphs. Students should use APSA citation style including in-text parenthetical citations and a complete bibliography. Essays should be in a persuasive style, but use no personal opinion. Essays should have a clear thesis in support of, or against, a particular reform to U.S. government and use evidence and research to support the case.
 2. At least one campaign **visualization** of some kind. This might be an info-graphic, TikTok video, slideshow (optimized for social media distribution), poster, sticker, button, etc.

Project grades will be comprised of individual (15%) and collective (5%) scores.

- Essay rough draft due **Th. Apr. 21, @class time**
- Peer review due **T. May 3, @class time**
- Final draft due **Tuesday, May 17, 10:30 a.m.**
- *Reform proposal debate 15%* In lieu of a final examination, Reform proposal groups will present their campaigns in a debate format during the final examination period, **Tuesday, May 17,**

10:30 a.m. - 1:15 p.m.. Project grades will be comprised of individual (10%) and collective (5%) scores.

Late Work

There are no opportunities for earning extra or bonus credit in this course. Late assignments may be submitted for a 5 percent per day penalty. No assignments will be accepted after the last day of instruction for the semester on the university calendar (May 6).

Attendance

Learning is an active, rather than passive, exercise. To succeed in this class, read all the assigned readings using an active and engaged reading comprehension strategy, attend class prepared to engage with colleagues about the material, practice self-respect, peer-respect, humility, and self-assurance. Be willing to take risks and to receive constructive criticism as a collective means of advancing the work, not as a personal rebuke. Scholarship is not personal.

COVID-19 Mitigation

In accordance with university policy, all students are required to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including having received a booster shot within the last six months. In addition, students must wear masks that cover their nose and mouth at all times while indoors on Mason's campus. The vaccine is to protect you; the masks are to protect others. With some luck, our class will be uninterrupted by viral outbreaks during the course of the term. If you have concerns related to your health or the health policies in class, discuss them with your instructor.

Readings

Keeping pace with assigned readings is essential to succeeding in this class. It is your responsibility to obtain copies of the readings prior to the date we will discuss them in class. I will do everything I can to make this task easier for you. You will be much more successful in this course if you complete the assigned readings and take notes on them.

Technology

Students will need regular access to computer and internet technology to complete this course. Students may bring laptops or tablets to class for the purpose of referencing or taking notes; however, I recommend students minimize screen usage in class and take notes by hand. I recommend the use of bibliographic software to store references (e.g., Zotero) and statistical software for data analysis (e.g., R, Stata).

Plagiarism

Students in this course will comply with the [George Mason University Honor Code](#). There are three simple guidelines to follow with respect to academic integrity:

1. All work you submit must be your own
2. When using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations
3. If you are uncertain about the expectations for any assignment, ask for clarification.

Any student engaged in any academic misconduct will receive an F on the offending exam or assignment. Egregious violations will result in an F grade for the course and will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity.

Students with disabilities

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please contact the instructor and contact [Disability Services](#), (703) 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through that office.

Diversity, equality, and inclusion

George Mason University values diversity in its learning, research, and civic activities. All members of the Mason community are asked to show respect to one another at all times. The learning environment in this class respects a wide array of viewpoints. Students of all cultural, ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds are welcome. More information about Mason's policies surrounding diversity can be found at the [Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#). Should you need accommodations related to observing a [religious holiday](#), please contact the instructor. It is your responsibility to communicate with the instructor if religious observations conflict with course requirements.

Student Privacy

The [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#) grants students continuous access to educational records upon their request, allows students to amend their record if errors are found, and restricts how and when educational records can be disclosed. Your instructor will not release information about your academic record in this course to anyone without the student's permission.

Email

Mason uses only Mason e-mail accounts to communicate with enrolled students. Students must activate their Mason e-mail account, use it to communicate with their department and other administrative units, and check it regularly for important university information including messages related to this class. Email etiquette: An email is a professional correspondence; do not write it as if it is a text message, snap, tweet, or IM. Always use a salutation and sign your name. Consider creating a signature that automatically inserts your name and basic contact information at the bottom of your emails. Use proper punctuation and grammar.

Dropping or Withdrawing

January 31	Last day to add
February 7	Last day to drop with no tuition penalty
February 14	Last day to drop with 50% tuition penalty
February 15 - March 1	Unrestricted withdraw with 100% tuition penalty
March 2 - April 11	Selective withdraw (undergrads only)

After April 11 there are no options for withdrawing from the course. If you have concerns about your performance in the course, or you find yourself unable to perform for any reason, you should discuss your concerns with your teaching assistant, professor, advisor, and Assistant Dean (in that order). Students seeking to drop or withdraw are responsible for doing so on their own in Patriot Web.

Consumption of Political News

As a part of this course, it is your responsibility to be well-informed about current events and political news. It is increasingly difficult to learn about political events in a way that is even-handed and non-partisan. Here are some tips about how to consume news in a way that will provide you with the most value:

1. Consume a variety of well-respected news sources. In general, for national political news I recommend *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *National Public Radio*. Instructions for accessing subscription services through Mason are below.
2. Avoid television news altogether, except on election night.
3. Avoid getting your news exclusively from social media.
4. Avoid news sources that seek to provoke an emotional response. Try to consume news *dispassionately*. It's okay to have passion about politics, rights, justice, issues, etc; but, try to consume news with a sense of curiosity, rather than an urge to be outraged, touched, or emotive. Train yourself to read a headline and response with, "Huh, that's interesting," rather than automatically clicking forward, like, retweet, etc.
5. Generally, read news in formats that offer content longer than a few sentences.
6. Podcasts are also a great way to keep up with news. Some podcasts I enjoy include *Politics Podcast (NPR)*, *Politics (FiveThirtyEight)*, *Checks and Balances (The Economist)*, *The Ezra Klein Show (New York Times)*, *Political Gabfest (Slate)*, *The Daily (New York Times)*, *Political Research Digest (The Niskanen Center)*.

Instructions for accessing subscription news sources with your Mason login credentials: As a Mason student, your tuition provides you access to dozens of subscription-only news services. You can find a list of some of the best ones, and instructions on how to access them from [this great library source](#). In most cases, you will need to access sources using the Mason [Virtual Private Network](#).

Resources for Students

College can be a stressful experience. It is normal to sometimes feel overwhelmed, out of place, or, insecure. Self-care strategies are important for maintaining your physical, emotional, and academic health. Developing self-awareness about stress, anxiety, or health issues is an important part of your development and success as a student. The following campus resources are available to you to help you learn to manage the complexities of your college:

- [Academic Advising](#)
- [Center for Culture, Equity, and Empowerment](#)
- [Compliance, Diversity, Ethics \(including sexual misconduct and harassment; Title IX\)](#)
- [Counseling and Psychological Services](#)
- [COVID-19 campus policies, services, and data](#)
- [Disability Student Services](#)
- [Financial Aid](#)
- [International Programs and Services](#)
- [Learning Services](#)
- [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning+ Resources Center](#)
- [Mason Library](#)

- [Math Tutoring Center](#)
- [Military Alliance Program](#)
- [Online Learning Services](#)
- [Student Conduct](#)
- [Student Emergency Assistance Fund](#)
- [Student Health Services](#)
- [Universit Career Services](#)
- [University Life](#)
- [Writing Center](#)

Required Readings

Reading Load

The reading load for this course is intense. We will read about a book a week, in addition to a handful of articles. It is vital that you keep up with the readings.

Reading Tips

Regardless of whether you are reading something online or hard-copy, if you are reading a borrowed text or something you own, are reading a text you're willing to mark on or not, the following tips will help you retain the information you read and recall it when you want to.

1. Have a notebook that is dedicate to note-taking for this course. Only use this notebook for this course—nothing else goes in it.
2. Start a fresh page of notes for each new item you read.
3. Write the complete citation at the top of page.
4. As you read, write down main ideas, questions, interesting tid-bits, things you'd like to remember, or things you can connect to something else.
5. Every time you write a note, write the page number the note refers to.
6. Try not to write down direct quotes from what you are reading, but if you do, be sure to "put it into quotation marks" so you know the note is not your own words. This habit will help you from committing incidental plagiarism. Refer to your notes with confidence that any note not in quotation marks are your own words.
7. Consider using different colored pens for different kinds of notes. For example, you might use *black* ink for quotations, *red* ink for questions, *blue* ink for your own thoughts, summaries, and ideas, and *green* ink for references to other texts.
8. You may or may not want to highlight your text, or make notes in the margins. Regardless of whether you make in-text marks, your notes in your notebook should always be your primary source of personal reference for your reading.
9. Use the following questions to help you focus your attention about a complete piece of research:
 - (a) What is the main question the author is asking?
 - (b) What motivates the question? Why is it important?
 - (c) What is the primary expectation, hypothesis, or claim the author seeks to evaluate?
 - (d) On what theory or logic is the expectation based?

- (e) What methods of investigation has the author used to evaluate the claim?
- (f) What are the primary findings? Were the expectations met?
- (g) How does this research advance, or contribute to, our knowledge of this topic?

Texts

There are many ways to acquire these books and I am indifferent to whether your purchase or rent, acquire new or used, arrange for hard-copies or electronic texts; however, I am aware that books are expensive and I do not want the cost of books to impede any student's ability to fully participate in the course. **Enrolled students are guaranteed access to course texts in some form, regardless of personal resources. If financial constraints pose a barrier to accessing the texts in this course, please contact the instructor;** I will help you gain access to any texts necessary to complete this course. Alternatives may include borrowing a text from me, using a library copy, or starting a class "Go Fund Me" page to support book purchases. Please be aware that some alternatives require advance planning and time to implement. Plan ahead.

We will read all or most of the following books. If purchased new from Amazon, these titles cost about \$175 in total. If rented used from the GMU bookstore, the total cost is about \$88.

1. Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
2. Drutman, Lee. *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
3. La Raja, Raymond J., and Brian F. Schaffner. *Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015.
4. Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2018.
5. Michener, Jamila. *Fragmented Democracy: Medicaid, Federalism, and Unequal Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
6. Settle, Jaime E. *Frenemies: How Social Media Polarizes America*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
7. Trounstine, Jessica. *Segregation by Design: Local Politics and Inequality in American Cities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
8. Young, Dannagal Goldthwaite. *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Class Schedule

Week 01, T. Jan. 25 & Th. Jan 27: Syllabus Day

Read *all* associated documents on course website.

- [Writing Tips](#)
- [Study Tips](#)
- [Zotero guide](#)
- [L^AT_EX and Overleaf guide](#)
- [APSA Citation Style Guide](#)

Week 02, T. Feb. 1 & Th. Feb. 3: Is the US a democracy?

Reading Assignments

1. Achen & Bartels, Chs. 1 & 2
2. Taylor, Steven L., Matthew Soberg Shugart, Arend Lijphart, and Bernard Grofman. *A Different Democracy: American Government in a 31-Country Perspective*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014., **Chs. 2 & 3** [ONLINE]

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)

Week 03, T. Feb. 8 & Th. Feb. 10: Is US democracy in danger?

Reading Assignments

1. Achen & Bartels, Chs. 3 & 4
2. Levitsky & Ziblatt, Chs. 1 - 4
3. Azari, Julia. “Forget Norms. Our Democracy Depends On Values.” *FiveThirtyEight* (blog), May 24, 2018. [LINK](#)

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)

Week 04, T. Feb. 15 & Th. Feb. 17: Yes. Yes, it is.

Reading Assignments

1. Levitsky & Ziblatt, Chs. 5 - 6
2. Cassidy, John. “The Long-Term Damage of Trump’s Antidemocratic Lies.” *The New Yorker*, November 13, 2020. [ARTICLE LINK](#)
3. Harned, Lena Surzhko, and Luis Jimenez. “President Trump’s Use of the Authoritarian Playbook Will Have Lasting Consequences.” *The Conversation* (blog), December 17, 2020. [ARTICLE LINK](#)
4. Masket, Seth. “We Freaking Warned You.” *Mischiefs of Faction* (blog), January 9, 2021. [ARTICLE LINK](#)
5. Brightline Watch. “Tempered Expectations and Hardened Divisions a Year into the Biden Presidency,” Bright Line Watch, November 2021. [LINK](#)

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)

Week 05, T. Feb. 22 & Th. Feb. 24: Can elections Keep politicians accountable?

Reading Assignments

1. Achen & Bartels, Chs. 5 - 7
2. Drutman, Chs. 1 - 4

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)
- Reform position paper #1 (Th. 2/24)

Week 06, T. Mar. 1, & Th. Mar. 3: Are parties the problem? Or money?

Reading Assignments

1. La Raja & Schaffner, *entire*

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)

Week 07, T. Mar. 8 & Th. Mar. 10: Are *these* parties the problem?

Reading Assignments

1. Drutman, Chs. 5 - 7
2. Klein, Ezra. “Steve Bannon Is Onto Something.” *The New York Times*, January 9, 2022, sec. Opinion. [LINK](#)

Items due:

- Quick Write (X1)
- **Midterm Exam, Thursday, March 9 in class**

Week 08, T. Mar. 15 & Th. Mar. 17: *Spring Break*

Week 09, T. Mar. 22 & Th. Mar. 24: Is social media the problem?

Reading Assignments

1. Settle, Chs. 1 - 4
2. Young, Chs. 1 - 2

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)

Week 10, T. Mar. 29 & Th. Mar. 31: Is it media's fault?

Reading Assignments

1. Settle, Chs. 5 - 8
2. Young, Chs. 3 - 5

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)
- Reform position paper #2 (Th., 3/31)

Week 11, T. Apr. 5 & Th. Apr. 7: The states will save us, right?

Reading Assignments

1. Michener, *entire*

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)

Week 12, T. Apr. 12 & Th. Apr. 14: Is the US a multi-racial democracy?

Reading Assignments

1. Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*, May 22, 2014. [ARTICLE LINK](#)
2. Trounstine, Chs. 1 - 2

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)

Week 13, T. Apr. 19 & Th. Apr. 21: Racism doesn't happen if people aren't racist, right?

Reading Assignments

1. Trounstine, Chs. 3 - 6

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)
- Project essay rough draft (Th., 4/21)

Week 14, T. Apr. 26 & Th. Apr. 28: 'All politics is local'

Reading Assignments

1. Trounstine, Chs. 7 - 10

Items due:

- Quick Write (X2)
- Reform position paper #3 (Th., 4/28)

Week 15, T. May 3 & Th. May 5: Where do we go from here?

Reading Assignments

1. Achen & Bartels, Chs. 10 & 11 (optional Chs. 8 & 9)
2. Levitsky & Ziblatt, Chs. 7 - 9
3. Victor, Jennifer. “Three Things Everyone Can Do to Reinforce US Democracy.” *Mischiefs of Faction* (blog), October 12, 2021. [LINK](#)

Items due

- Peer review (T., May 3)
- (No Quick Writes this week)

Final Presentations, Tues., May 17, 10:30 a.m. - 1:15 p.m.