Congressional and Political Reforms LGAF6240

M.P.S. in Legislative Affairs
Fall 2021
30 August – December 6, 2021

Congressional and Political Reforms
LGAF6240
Credits: 3

Mondays/6:00 PM – 8:00 PM
Hall of States, 400 North Capitol Street, N.W.

BASIC INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Instructor
Maresa Strano
Mobile (607) 759-3425
maresa.strano@gmail.com

Communication
The best way to contact me is via e-mail. You can normally expect a response within 24 hours or less. I am available to meet with you by appointment – send an e-mail to request a meeting.

Blackboard Site
A Blackboard course site has been set up for this course. Each student is expected to check the site throughout the semester, as Blackboard will be the primary venue for outside classroom communications between the instructor and the students. Students can access the course site at https://blackboard.gwu.edu. Support for Blackboard is available at 202-994-4948 or helpdesk.gwu.edu.

Academic Integrity
Academic Integrity
All members of the university community are expected to exhibit honesty and competence in their academic work. Students have a special responsibility to acquaint themselves with, and make use of, all proper procedures for doing research, writing papers, and taking exams. Members of the community will be presumed to be familiar with the proper academic procedures and will be held responsible for applying them. Deliberate failure to act in accordance with such procedures will be considered academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty is defined as “cheating of any kind, including misrepresenting one’s own work, taking credit for the work of others without crediting them and without appropriate authorization, and the fabrication of information.” Acts of academic dishonesty are a legal, moral, and intellectual offense against the community and will be prosecuted through the proper university channels. The University Code of Academic Integrity can be found at http://studentconduct.gwu.edu/code-academic-integrity.
University Policy on Observance of Religious Holidays
● Students should notify faculty during the first week of the semester of their intention to be absent from class on their day(s) of religious observance.
● Faculty should extend to these students the courtesy of absence without penalty on such occasions, including permission to make up examinations.
● Faculty who intend to observe a religious holiday should arrange at the beginning of the semester to reschedule missed classes or to make other provisions for their course-related activities

Support for Students with Disabilities
GW's Disability Support Services (DSS) provides and coordinates accommodations and other services for students with a wide variety of disabilities, as well as those temporarily disabled by injury or illness. Accommodations are available through DSS to facilitate academic access for students with disabilities. Please notify your instructor if you require accommodations. Additional information is available at http://disabilitysupport.gwu.edu/.

Title IX: Confidentiality and Responsible Employee Statement
The George Washington University (GWU) and its faculty are committed to helping create a safe and open learning environment for all students. If you (or someone you know) have experienced any form of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, dating or domestic violence, or stalking, know that help and support are available. GWU strongly encourages all members of the community to take action, seek support and report incidents of sexual misconduct to the Title IX Office. Please be aware that under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, faculty members are required to disclose information about such misconduct to the Title IX Office.

If you wish to speak to a confidential employee who does not have this reporting responsibility, you can contact Mental Health Services through Colonial Health (counselors are available 24/7 at 202-994-5300 or you can make an appointment to see a counselor in person.). For more information about reporting options and resources at GWU and the community, please visit https://haven.gwu.edu/.

In the Event of an Emergency or Crisis during Class
If we experience an emergency during class time, we will try to stay at this location until we hear that we can move about safely. If we have to leave here, we will meet at Union Station in order to account for everyone and to make certain that everyone is safe. Please refer to Campus Advisories for the latest information on the University’s operating status: http://www.campusadvisories.gwu.edu/.

Attendance Policy
You are expected to attend all the classes. If for some reason you are to be late or miss a class, please let me know via e-mail prior to the class starting. Multiple missed classes will have an impact on your final grade.

Course Evaluation
At the end of the semester, students will be given the opportunity to evaluate the course through GW's online course evaluation system. It is very important that you take the time to complete an evaluation. Students are also encouraged to provide feedback throughout the course of the semester by contacting any/all of the following:

Dr. Casey Burgat
Director, Legislative Affairs Program cburgat@gwu.edu | 202-994-2272

Suzanne Farrand
Director of Academic Administration, GSPM
sfarrand@gwu.edu | 202-994-9309

The Course

Legislative Affairs Program Objectives
Upon completion of the Master's degree in Legislative Affairs, students will:
1. Gain both theoretical and practical knowledge related to the U.S. Congress, general issues in the legislative arena, and how to effectively advance legislation;
2. Hone their oral and written communication skills in both theoretical and technical aspects of legislative affairs;
3. Be able to conduct cutting-edge research and engage in effective problem solving by learning critical thinking skills;
4. Learn how to work effectively with others, the value of collaborative work, and will understand ethical issues involved in the legislative arena.

Graduate School Expectations
Students enrolled in a graduate program should take their academic responsibilities seriously and be prepared to meet the following expectations:
1. Utilize effective time management skills so as to complete and submit their assignments on their required due dates and times.
2. Have attained a mastery of written communication skills including proper sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and word usage.
3. Understand how to properly format in-text citations and references for resources and information integrated into their written assignments.

Course Description and Overview
This course will be a practitioner-focused deep dive into contemporary political reform in the United States by examining a range of reform proposals that have gained salience in recent
years alongside a steep rise in polarization, distrust in government, and general democratic
dysfunction. Each session will examine a specific reform or set of related reforms through a
variety of lenses, and leverage a variety of analytical and strategy frameworks to give students a
better sense of what it takes to work on these issues. We will consider questions such as: what
are the trade-offs of a particular reform; where should reformers direct their resources and
efforts; who are the movement’s key stakeholders; when is the right (and wrong) time to push
for change; and most importantly, how can individuals and groups inside and outside of
Washington come together to pass, implement, and defend reforms? Students should come
away from this course with a working knowledge of the political reform landscape—including
current efforts to “fix” Congress, reduce hyperpartisanship, empower citizens to engage more
fully in civic life—and a new set of tools for communicating about and researching these issues,
as well as crafting future change strategies.

Learning objectives
1. Gain a deeper understanding of the current political reform landscape, inside and
outside of Congress.
2. Explore solutions to the country’s most urgent and/or intractable governance challenges.
3. Evaluate and apply lessons from successful and failed reform efforts.
4. Develop skills to build effective reform coalitions and sustainable policy.

Document Citations
We will use the APA Style for essays, citations and bibliographies. A sample of the style can be
found on the GW website at: https://guides.himmelfarb.gwu.edu/c.php?g=27779&p=170369.
PLEASE NOTE: You can lose points for failure to footnote accurately or for grammatical and
spelling errors. This is a graduate course, and graduate level work requires that your work is
proofread and presented in an acceptable manner. Also, use footnotes instead of endnotes!

Course Requirements

Attendance and deadlines
You are expected to attend all classes. A reduction of one half letter grade will be taken for
students missing more than two (2) classes and additional one half letter grade reductions will
be imposed for missing each class after that (exceptions will apply to emergencies situations
only). If a student must miss a class, the student must email the professor prior to the beginning
of class.

Written assignments will be due on Fridays. Due dates are listed within the syllabus, and late
assignments will receive a maximum of 85% of the total grade.

Participation (20% of grade)
Any graduate seminar discussion is enlivened by the thoughtful contributions of all the students
in class. You are expected to be prepared and participate in class discussions. Our discussions
will be keyed, in large part, off of the readings that students are required to read prior to each
class period.
In order to stimulate discussion (and make sure the readings are being read), students should have a minimum of two (2) discussion questions for the class ready in case being called on. The questions can stem from implications of the topic; or more general takeaways that may lead to deeper understanding when discussed. If it becomes clear students don’t have discussion questions ready, I reserve the right to make them due on discussion boards.

**Current Events**
At the beginning of each class period we will review current events & issues related to our course subject matter. Keep up with current events as they pertain to the topics of this course.

**Evaluation and Grading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory biography</td>
<td>August 27</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group “events”</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research memo</td>
<td>September 24</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy brief + 5-minute</td>
<td>October 22</td>
<td>Written brief - 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recorded presentation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation - 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Op-ed pitch / draft</td>
<td>Pitch - November 12</td>
<td>Pitch - 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Draft - December 3</td>
<td>Draft - 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class participation</td>
<td></td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following is the grade scale for all GSPM classes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade*</th>
<th>Grading Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A 94-100</td>
<td>Your work is outstanding and ready for submission in a professional environment. Your material, effort, research, and writing demonstrate superior work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A- 90-93</td>
<td>Represents solid work with minor errors. Overall, excellent work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+ 87-89</td>
<td>Very good. Represents well-written material, research, and presentation, but needs some minor work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83-86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>80-82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>77-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>73-76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>70-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(lowest grade to pass)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Below 70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Please note that you may be penalized for late submission of assignment(s).*

**Assignments**

1. **Introductory biography**
   - To make the course content as relevant as possible and to facilitate classroom discussion and the sharing of professional information, each student will submit a two-to-three paragraph bio describing their educational background, work experience in and around politics and policy, and career goals.

2. **Group “event”**
   - Each student will at some point in the semester plan and lead an in-class “event,” involving the entire class, for at least 45 minutes. Creativity, role playing, and small group breakouts are encouraged.

3. **Research memo**
   - Each student will write a ~1,500 word memo on a reform movement (past or present) of their choice, in the format and style of their choice. All memos should address historical context and milestones, arguments for and against, prominent sources and experts, key stakeholders, role of the media, and major successes and failures.

4. **Policy brief + presentation**
   - Each student will write a 1,500 word policy brief on a topic of their choice, and record a 5-minute presentation on the brief. Briefs should be written for a general audience and should include the following:
     - Sections
- **Introduction** (why this problem matters, preview of recommendations)
- **Short overview of the landscape**
- **Three recommendations** (each supported by a combination of qualitative and quantitative research from reliable sources/leaders in the field as well as relevant media content if appropriate)
- **Enactment plan and success criteria** (realistically, what would it take--money, leadership, public support, complementary legislation--to bring these recommendations to fruition?)
- **Conclusion**
  - Elements
    - Infobox with topline findings and recommendations
  - Infographic
  - Promotional copy
    - Two sample tweets
    - Brief email announcement

5. **Op-ed**
   - To better understand what goes into placing and publishing an op-ed, each student will email me a story pitch two weeks prior to the draft deadline. The pitch will include the target outlet (e.g. national or regional newspaper, blog, trade publication) and will explain why it is the right fit for the piece. It will also establish the student’s authority on the subject, the core argument of the piece, and why it matters. The topic can be the same as the one used for the policy brief (recommended), or something else. The pitch should be 2-3 paragraphs. The op-ed draft itself will be 800-1,000 words. Resource: https://www.theopedproject.org/oped-basics

**Required text and learning materials**

- *Our Common Purpose* - American Academy of Arts & Sciences, pdf download
- *Governing in a Polarized America: A Bipartisan Blueprint to Strengthen our Democracy* - Bipartisan Policy Center, pdf download

Except for *Doom Loop* all materials will be made available for free, either on Blackboard class website or via links within this syllabus.

**Tentative Course Calendar***
*The instructor reserves the right to alter course content and/or adjust the pace to accommodate class progress. Students are responsible for keeping up with all adjustments to the course calendar. The topical order may have to be switched to fit the availability of the speakers.

**Week 1: August 30 - Introductions**
READINGS
- Syllabus
- PODCAST: “An inspiring conversation about democracy” - Danielle Allen and Ezra Klein, The Ezra Klein Show (Vox Conversations), 2019, available here or wherever you get your podcasts

ASSIGNMENTS DUE
Introductory bio
Subscribe to the Fulcrum newsletter

**Week 2: September 6 (no class for Labor Day) - Institutions, ideals, and interests of political reform**

READINGS
- Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop - Chapters 2, 4-5
- EXCERPT: Democracy More or Less: America’s Political Reform Quandary - Bruce Cain, Chapter 1, (pdf download)
- Two Pathways to Congressional Reform - Daniel Stid, Hewlett Foundation, (pdf download)

ASSIGNMENTS DUE
None

I. Reforming Congress

**Week 3: September 13 - A decade of debate on earmark reform**

READINGS
- Background
  - The Rise and (Relative) Fall of Earmarks: Congress and Reform, 2006–2010 - Richard B. Doyle, Public Budgeting & Finance, 2011, (link)
  - Lifting the Earmark Moratorium: Frequently Asked Questions - CRS, Updated December 3, 2020, (link)
  - Restoring the Power of the Purse - Zachary Courser and Kevin R. Kosar, AEI, February 2021, (pdf)
  - “Senate Republicans agree to keep a symbolic ban on earmarks, but may use them anyway,” Emily Cochrane, New York Times, April 21, 2021, (link)

- Perspectives over time (read as many as you can)
- “Taxpayer Groups: Don’t End The Earmark Moratorium” - Taxpayers for Common Sense & National Taxpayers Union, November 14, 2018, [link]
- *Renew the Earmark Ban* - The Heritage Foundation, December 13, 2018, [link]
- “Congress in 2019: Why the first branch should bring back earmarks” - John Hudak, Brookings Institution, December 27, 2018, [link]
- “The dead earmarks society,” Kate Ackley, Roll Call, February 15, 2021, [link]

**ASSIGNMENTS DUE**

- Come to class with an example of an earmarked appropriation that went to your home district (at any time in history) and provide some context and insights into the motivations and consequences of the appropriation.
- Choose a political reform topic to research for your memo

**Week 4: September 20 - Risks and rewards of filibuster reform**

**READINGS**

- VIDEO CLIP: “Politics or Principle” - CSPAN Interview with Sarah Binder, February 2, 2010, [link].
- What is the Senate filibuster, and what would it take to eliminate it? - Molly E. Reynolds, Brookings Institution, September 9, 2020, [link]
- “We Will Miss the Filibuster” - Kevin D. Williamson, *National Review*, July 5, 2020 [link]
- “Scorched-earth Senate filibuster threat from McConnell needs to be tested” - Lee Drutman, NBC Think, March 16, 2021, [link] (make sure to watch the embedded Stacey Abrams interview on Meet the Press)
- “Opinion: Joe Manchin: I will not to eliminate or weaken the filibuster, *Washington Post*, April 2021, [link]
- “Americans for Prosperity launches campaign targeting six Democrats to oppose ending filibuster,” *The Hill*, April 30, 2021, [link]

ASSIGNMENTS DUE
None

**Week 5: September 27** - *Is 435 enough?*
***GUEST SPEAKER*** Lee Drutman

**READINGS**
- *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop*, pp. 191-194
- *Our Common Purpose* - Strategy 1.1 pp. 22-24
- “U.S. House districts are colossal. What's the right size?” - Kathryn Crespin, Stat Chat, University of Virginia, November 15, 2017, [link]

**ASSIGNMENTS DUE**
Research memo

**Week 6: October 4** - Restoring congressional capacity+reversing “congressional brain drain”

**READINGS**
- *Bring in the nerds: Reviving the Office of Technology Assessment* - Zach Graves and Kevin Kosar, R Street, [pdf]

**ASSIGNMENTS DUE**
Confirm topic for policy brief
II. Money in Politics and Governance

Week 7: October 11 - Money in politics post-Citizens United

***GUEST SPEAKER*** Mark Schmitt

READINGS
- PODCAST: “Why good people are easily corrupted” - Lawrence Lessig and Ezra Klein, The Ezra Klein Show (Vox Conversations), 2019, available here or wherever you get your podcasts
- “Philanthropic Harm,” Mark Schmitt, Democracy Journal, Spring 2019, (link)
- “It's time for liberals to get over Citizens United,” Scot Casleton, Vox, May 7, 2028, (link)
- “The Movement to Overturn Citizens United is Going to Win,” Public Citizen, June 7, 2019, (link)
- “More money, less transparency: A decade under Citizens United” - Center for Responsive Politics, January 2020, (link)
- Browse: https://endcitizensunited.org/?gclid=CjwKCAjwm7mEBhBsEiwA_of-TKu59Xl7F9c_15tWIXy8hdN2KmGn4CI54tVT6irFjil1s1ho76tD7iRoCPCsQAvD_BwE

ASSIGNMENTS DUE
Select a current representative or senator with history serving in state or local elected office for an in-class research exercise.

Week 8: October 18 - Leveling the playing field through small-donor public financing

READINGS
- The Participation Interest - Spencer Overton, (link)
- Public Funding for Electoral Campaigns: How 27 States, Counties, and Municipalities Empower Small Donors and Curb the Power of Big Money in Politics - Demos, 2017, (link)
- “Building a More Diverse Donor Coalition” - Jennifer Heerwig and Brian J. McCabe, 2020, (link)
- “Seattle’s Public Financing Breakthrough,” David Moore, American Prospect, December 25, 2020, (link)
- “‘Democracy dollars’ proposal looks to spread influence, participation in elections,” Chad Swiatecki, Austin Monitor, March 29, 2021, (link)
• “‘Democracy Dollars’: Gillibrand’s plan to give every voter $600 to donate to campaigns,” Benjy Sarlin, NBC News, May 1, 2019, (link)

ASSIGNMENTS DUE

Week 9: October 25 - Does More Democracy Equal Better Governance? Case of Participatory Budgeting

***Guest Speaker*** Hollie Russon Gilman

READINGS

• VIDEOS:
  ○ “Real Money, Real Power: Participatory Budgeting” - The Participatory Budgeting Project, (link)

• Our Common Purpose, Strategy 3: Ensure the Responsiveness of Political Institutions pp. 41-47

• “From the Covid-19 Crisis to Rebuilding our Public Technology Infrastructure in Local Government,” Hollie Russon Gilman, Next City, April 8, 2020, (link)

• Browse: https://participedia.net/

ASSIGNMENTS DUE

Policy brief and presentations

III. Electoral and Voting Reforms

Week 10: November 1 - Paths to structural election reform

READINGS

• Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop, Chapters 8-10
• Governing in a Polarized America: A Bipartisan Blueprint to Strengthen our Democracy - Bipartisan Policy Center, pp. 29-49
• Comparative Structural Reform: Assessing The Impact Of 37 Structural Reforms - FairVote, January 2016, (link)
• Our Common Purpose, pp. 32-40
• “How Election Reforms Spread,” Avi Green, May 7, 2019, (link)
• Browse: https://represent.us/

ASSIGNMENTS DUE

None

Week 11: November 8 - 2020 was a watershed year for voting reform — and backlash

READINGS


“Voting Laws Roundup: March 2021” - Brennan Center for Justice, [link]

“America’s Elections Won’t Be the Same After 2020,” Russell Berman and Elaine Godfrey, The Atlantic, April 28, 2020, [link]

“What Absentee Voting Looked Like In All 50 States,” Nathaniel Rakich and Jasmine Mithani, FiveThirtyEight, February 9, 2021, [link]


ASSIGNMENTS DUE
None

Week 12: November 15 - Congress goes big on democracy reform - H.R.1 and H.R. 4

READINGS

“Annotated Guide to the For the People Act of 2021,” Brennan Center for Justice, March 2021, [link] and “A Broad Coalition for Democracy Reform” [link]

“The Bipartisan Origins & Impact of the For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1),” Campaign Legal Center, [pdf]


“Black Democrats urge party to shift its voting rights push,” Sarah Ferris, Laura Barron Lopez, and Nicholas Wu, Politico, April 22, 2021, [link]

“How This Voting Rights Bill Could Turn the Next Election Into a Clusterf*ck,” Jessica Huseman, The Daily Beast, March 30, 2021, [link]


“Inside the Koch-Backed Effort to Block the Largest Election-Reform Bill in Half a Century,” Jane Mayer, The New Yorker, [link]

ASSIGNMENTS DUE
Op-ed pitch

Week 13: November 22 - Can ranked-choice voting and multi-member districts save our democracy?

***Guest Speaker*** Unconfirmed

READINGS

Historical assessment of the first state-wide passage of ranked choice voting in Maine - Kathy Armstrong, September 2019, [pdf]
Will Ranked Choice Voting Be Adopted Nationally to Replace First Past the Post Voting?
- Peter Ackerman and Cara McCormick (first 20 pages only)
- Our Common Purpose, pp. 25-26
- The Fair Representation Act, (link)
- PODCAST: “Tweak the Vote,” Radiolab, November 2018, (link) (or wherever you get your podcasts)

ASSIGNMENTS DUE
None

Week 14: November 29 - Mobilizing against partisan gerrymandering

READINGS

- “How do you stop politicians from rigging the ballot? This woman knows,” Ashley Spencer, The Guardian, April 2, 2020, (link)
- Michigan Campaign Timeline - Represent.Us, (link)
- TRAILER: Slay the Dragon - (link)
- “5 Things Communities of Color Should Know About Redistricting” - More Equitable Democracy, pdf
- “How to Get Away With Gerrymandering.” David Daley, Slate, October 2, 2019, (link)
- “In Virginia, Democrats Urge Voters To Reject Redistricting Reform They Once Backed,” Daniella Cheslow, WAMU, October 9, 2020, (link)
- PODCAST: “Black Representation in North Carolina,” The Gerrymandering Project from FiveThirtyEight, available here or wherever you get your podcasts
- For fun: Gerrymandering puzzle game: (link)

ASSIGNMENTS DUE
Op-ed draft

Week 15: December 6 - Why do we still have the Electoral College?

READINGS

- PODCAST: “The Electoral College Has Outlived Its Usefulness” - Intelligence Squared US, May 2020, (link)
● “Speeches Advocating Direct Election for President” - FairVote, [link]
● “The National Popular Vote (NPV) Initiative: Direct Election of the President by Interstate Compact” - CRS, Updated October 28, 2019, [pdf]
● “The Electoral College: An Overview and Analysis of Reform Proposals” - EveryCRSReport.com, [link] (start reading at “Electoral College Reform: The Fox and the Hedgehog”)
  ● [link]
  ● **Browse:** [https://saveourstates.com/](https://saveourstates.com/), [https://www.nationalpopularvote.com/](https://www.nationalpopularvote.com/)

**ASSIGNMENTS DUE**

None