

POS2041 (3 CREDITS)
AMERICAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

General Education Core: Social Sciences (S)
Section: 201S (Fall 2025)

Instructor:	J.S. Truscott	Email:	jaketruscott@ufl.edu
Class Time:	MWF 11:45-12:35	Class Location:	MAT 0251
Office:	Anderson 317	Office Hours:	W 1:00-3:00

Course Description

In this course, students will investigate how the national government is structured and how the American constitutional republic operates. It covers the philosophical and historical foundations of American government, including but not limited to the Declaration of Independence, the United States constitution and all its amendments, and The Federalist Papers. The course examines the branches of government and the government's laws, policies, and programs. It also examines the ways in which citizens participate in their government and ways their government responds to citizens.

State Core Student Learning Outcomes

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of the basic principles and practices of America's constitutional republic.
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of the nation's founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution and its amendments, and the Federalist Papers.
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases, landmark legislation, and landmark executive actions.
- Students will demonstrate knowledge of the history and development of the American federal government and its impact on law and society.
- Students will demonstrate an ability to apply course material to contemporary political issues and debates.
- Students will demonstrate an ability to engage in discussion and civil debate on American politics that are associated with multiple points of view.

Subject Area Student Learning Outcomes

Content: Identify, describe, and explain key themes, principles, and terminology; the history, theory and/or methodologies used; and social institutions, structures and processes.

Critical Thinking: Apply formal and informal qualitative or quantitative analysis effectively to examine the processes and means by which individuals make personal and group decisions. Assess and analyze ethical perspectives in individual and societal decisions.

Communication: Communicate knowledge, thoughts and reasoning clearly and effectively.

For additional details concerning general education subject objectives, see [HERE](#).

Textbook

The main text for this course will guide most of our weekly discussions. It is expected that you will have read all of the assigned readings prior to the start of each class.

- *We the People* (14th Edition) – by Benjamin Ginsburg, Caroline J. Tolbert, Andrea L. Campbell, and Megan M. Francis (ISBN: 978-1-324-03475-9)

Additional Notes:

- While I will be teaching from the 14th Edition, earlier editions would likely suffice. Page numbers and examples used to structure substantive concepts will likely be different across editions, though the substantive focus of each chapter remains consistent.
- In a similar vein, a new 15th edition released in Summer 2025 – You are more than welcome to purchase it, though I will be referencing from the 14th edition.
- There is an array of different versions for each edition of *We the People* (Full Text, Core, and Essentials), please only purchase the *Full* version.
- The publisher (*W.W. Norton*) likewise facilitates different purchase options for the text (e-book, paperback, and hardcover). While I do not have a preference for which format you purchase, a purchase directly from the publisher will grant you access to their full suite of study materials and other supplemental guides. I do not assign quizzes through their InQuizitive platform, though these materials could be of particular use in studying for our quizzes and examinations.

Materials and Supplies Fee

Not Applicable

Evaluation

Examinations: Your exams will consist of a Midterm and Final Exam, both of which will be in person. The Final Exam will not be strictly cumulative – i.e., the Midterm will only encompass material learned prior to the Midterm date, and the Final will only encompass material learned after the midterm. However, given the natural progression of the course material, some content may be introduced in both the midterm and final examinations. They will both include a combination of multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank questions.

Quizzes: There will be (4) quizzes scheduled throughout the term. They will be made available on Canvas at 1:00 on Fridays and due by 11:59pm on the Sunday immediately following. For example, Quiz 1 will release on Friday, September 5 and be due on Canvas by 11:59pm on Sunday, September 7. These quizzes will include a combination of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short answer questions that mimic how questions will be presented for your exams.

Critical Response Essay: During the course of the term, you will be required to complete one critical response essay prompt that will be submitted to Canvas. A general rubric and essay tips are available at the conclusion of this syllabus. Each response paper should be approximately 6-8 pages double-spaced (12 pt font, Times New Roman). The structure of the paper will ultimately depend on how the question is structured, but they should generally follow the traditional essay format (Thesis → Body Paragraphs → Conclusion → Works Cited). I have no preference for which citation style you use, so long as it is consistent and present. All I ask is that you only use reputable sources (i.e., no *Wikipedia*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, etc.). If you have specific essay questions, please don't hesitate to ask!

Please Note: Again, you only need to complete **one** critical response essay from the list of prospective topics, which are listed in the *Course Schedule*. Each essay is due at 11:59pm on the Sunday corresponding with that week's material. More information will be provided during the first week of the semester and I will be sure to facilitate time for any questions that may emerge.

Participation: Your participation will be gauged primarily by your attendance and participation in the weekly lecture periods. Attendance is recorded daily, though I allow for two unexcused absences during the semester (more information in *Attendance Policy*). Absences recorded beyond those two will result in a 1-point reduction of your participation grade (*see table below*). Preliminary participation grades will be updated weekly beginning with the conclusion of the midterm examination.

Participation Grade Criteria

Metric	Grade
Active participation in weekly discussions during class periods and no absences apart from those excused or two allowed.	10
Generally same as above but at least one unexcused absence beyond the two allotted.	9
Often same as above but two unexcused absences beyond free allotment.	8
Varying participation in weekly discussions and/or several unexcused absences.	0–7

Grading Policy

Midterm Exam	25%
Final Exam	25%
Critical Response Essay	20%
Quizzes (4)	20%
Participation	10%

Grading Scale for Final Semester Grades

100-94 A	79.9-77 C+	63.9-60 D-
93.9-90 A-	76.9-74 C	59.9-0 F
89.9-87 B+	73.9-70 C-	
86.9-84 B	69.9-67 D+	
83.9-80 B-	66.9-64 D	

For more information concerning the University of Florida's *Grades and Grading Policy*, see [Here](#).

Communication with Instructor

If you need to contact me for any reason, I do ask that you aim to primarily use your UF email address rather than Canvas. I am generally very good about responding to emails quickly, but please understand that I likely will not respond until the next day if the message is sent late in the night.

Email: jaketruscott@ufl.edu

Attendance Policy

I will be taking attendance daily throughout the semester. That being said, I am fully aware that people have other things going on in their lives. If you happen to be absent on a day that I take attendance, please recognize that I allow (2) free absences without justification – i.e., you do not need to tell me why you are missing class. Additional unexcused absences will result in a diminished participation grade for the semester. Excused absences will **not** count towards your (2) free absences – these include (for example): *...illness; Title IX-related situations; serious accidents or emergencies affecting the student, their roommates, or their family; special curricular requirements (e.g., judging trips, field trips, professional conferences); military obligation; severe weather conditions that prevent class participation; religious holidays; participation in official university activities (e.g., music performances, athletic competition, debate); and court-imposed legal obligations (e.g., jury duty or subpoena). Other reasons (e.g., a job interview or club activity) may be deemed acceptable if approved by the instructor.*

For more information concerning the University's policies towards attendance and subsequent grace periods to accomplish missed work and other assignments, see [Here](#).

Academic Honesty (General & AI)

I recognize the importance and benefits of using generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools and large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT. However, using any AI tools during an exam, quiz, or to complete a written assignment is never permitted.

Furthermore, you are responsible for knowing and complying with the policy and procedures relating to academic honesty. This includes acknowledgment that all students at the University of Florida are bound by the following Honor Pledge: *We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honesty and integrity by abiding by the Student Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by Students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment."*

For more information, please visit: [Here](#).

Student Evaluations (Gator Evals)

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online. Students can complete evaluations in three ways: [1] The email they receive from GatorEvals; [2] Their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals; or [3] The central portal at <https://my-ufl.bluer.com>. Guidance on how to provide constructive feedback is available at <https://gatorevals.ua.ufl.edu/students/>. Students will be notified when the evaluation period

opens. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>.

Syllabus Policy

I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus, if necessary. I will give you fair notice (at least a week) if something, such as a reading assignment, is to change. However, it should be noted that these changes only include items that serve to benefit student learning – these do not include alterations to the grading scheme, attendance policy, student learning objectives, among other things.

Disability Resource Center

Students with disabilities who experience learning barriers and would like to request academic accommodations should connect with the Disability Resource Center. See “Get Started With the DRC” Disability Resource Center webpage (<https://disability.ufl.edu/get-started/>). It is important for students to share their accommodation letter with their instructor and discuss their access needs, as early as possible in the semester.

Withdrawal Policy

For information on dropping and withdrawing from courses, see [HERE](#)

Key Dates

- Sunday September 7 – Quiz 1 Due
- Sunday September 28 – Quiz 2 Due
- Friday October 10 – Midterm
- Sunday November 2 – Quiz 3 Due
- Sunday November 16 – Quiz 4 Due
- Friday December 12 – Final Exam

Course Schedule

Week 0 (8/22)

Topic: Syllabus & Introduction

Readings: Syllabus

Week 1 (8/25-8/29)

Topic: Americans and Their Political Values

Readings: Syllabus & *We the People* (Ch. 1)

Week 2 (9/3-9/5)

Topic: The Founding & the Constitution

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 2)

Week 3 (9/8-9/12)

Topic: Federalism

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 3)

Critical Response Topic: Consider yourself a policy analyst researching the modern immigration debate, which often places state and federal government agencies at odds in terms of enforcement and deterrence. Provide a discussion outlining the contemporary debate, as well as whether immigration and border policy should be addressed at the state or national level. Justify your decision. You might wish to acknowledge how state-level preferences towards this issue are not universal.

Week 4 (9/15-9/19)

Topic: Civil Liberties & Civil Rights

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 4-5)

Week 5 (9/22-9/26)

Topic: Public Opinion

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 6)

Critical Response Topic: Take the Political Compass test at www.politicalcompass.org or the Pew Research Center's political typology quiz at www.people-press.org. These sites rate your political ideology based on your opinions of social and policy issues. Can ideology help you to guide your political opinions or should your political opinions guide your ideology? Discuss.

Week 6 (9/29-10/3)

Topic: The Media & Political Information

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 7)

Critical Response Topic: Pick a current political topic and compare how it is reported by one of the national news outlets (ABC, CBS, or NBC), one of the cable news outlets (CNN, MSNBC, or FOX NEWS), and one newspaper (*New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, or the *Washington Post*). Identify the different frames and describe their impact.

Week 7 (10/6-10/10)

Topic: Political Participation & Voting

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 8)

Critical Response Topic: Why is turnout so low in American elections, and especially so for young people and minority groups? Examine the roles of institutional barriers and different types of elections (special, midterm, general, etc.) in your answer, and propose possible strategies to increase turnout for all Americans.

Week 8 (10/13-10/15)

Topic: Political Parties

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 9)

Week 9 (10/20-10/24)

Topic: Campaigns, Elections, and Interest Groups

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 10-11)

Critical Response Topic: Consider the role of special interests in American politics. Choose (3) interest groups and describe how they are able to influence the political system through lobbying, litigation, or other means.

Week 10 (10/27-10/31)

Topic: Congress

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 12)

Critical Response Topic: Investigate your representative's recent voting records and ideological placement (GovTrack). Make a list of five issues he or she voted on, and state whether you would have voted the same way on behalf of your district taking into account your district's economic and socio-economic characteristics. Justify your decisions.

Week 11 (11/3-11/7)

Topic: The Presidency & Bureaucracy

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 13-14)

Critical Response Topic: Choose (3) bureaucratic agencies/institutions in the American government and describe their roles and duties. In your response, consider why they were established, how their responsibilities have changed, and whether they should be reformed, eliminated, or perhaps privatized to improve efficiency. Justify your answer

Week 12 (11/10-11/14)

Topic: The Federal Courts

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 15)

Critical Response Topic: Consider the growing dependence on the federal courts to solve policy disputes. In your response, consider (3) policy areas where the Supreme Court has offered rulings in recent years that traditionally might have been left to the elected branches. Is the role of the federal courts in solving policy disputes a good thing? Justify your answer.

Week 13 (11/17-11/21)

Topic: Economic Policy & Social Policy

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 16-17)

Note: Quiz 4 Friday (4/18)

Critical Response Topic: Imagine you are a policy aide working in the White House. Write a policy memo that discusses the (3) most pressing issues in American domestic policy. These can include any assortment of policy areas. In your response, consider how these issues developed, why they are important, and propose solutions that might help fix them in the future.

Week 14 (11/24-11/28)

No Class – Thanksgiving

Week 15 (12/1-12/3)

Topic: Foreign Policy

Readings: *We the People* (Ch. 18)

Final Exam: (12/12) 7:30-9:30am

Critical Response Essay Rubric & Help Guide

Critical Response Essays Rubric (20pts)

Points	Structure	Grammar & Syntax	Formatting	Evidence
5	Clearly identified thesis statement with body paragraphs that support (reinforce) core claims or positions.	No grammar or syntax concerns	Properly structured title page, page numbers aligned bottom-right, and properly structured works cited page.	Proper inclusion of necessary references that are cited both in-text and in a works cited page with proper formatting. Sources used to reinforce (support) author's contributions, rather than supplement.
4	Thesis statement (body paragraphs) is (are) identifiable but requires subtle improvement.	1-2 Grammar (Syntax)	1 Formatting Issue	Evidence is included but formatting is misconfigured or used to supplement contribution.
3	Thesis and body paragraphs not identified or need significant improvement.	3(+) Grammar (Syntax) Issues	2(+) Formatting Issues	Several concerns with inclusion and usage of outside sources.
2 (or Fewer)	Thesis not identified and body paragraphs need significant improvement	Several Grammar (Syntax) Concerns	Several Formatting Issues	No outside references or omission of necessary citations.

Critical Response Essay Help Guide

This document will serve as a general guide for prospective questions that you might have related to the critical response paper assignment. If you have any other questions, feel free to shoot me an email (jaketruscott@ufl.edu) and I will be happy to clarify.

Q: What is a critical response paper?

A: A critical response essay is an essay requirement that asks you to critically analyze and respond to a prompt that corresponds with the course material that we are discussing in a given week.

Q: How many papers will we need to complete throughout the semester?

A: You only need to complete one critical response paper throughout the term, though you are free to submit several. I will accept whichever is the best to count towards your final grade.

Q: When are the prompts available, and when are they due?

A: The prompts can be seen as entries under **Critical Response Topic** for an associated week. You are free to start working on a topic at any time, though each prompt is due at 11:59pm on the Sunday corresponding with that week. For example, the critical response essay associated with Week 3 (9/8-9/12) is due to the Canvas dropbox on Sunday, 9/14.

Q: How will we know which response paper topic to complete?

A: The choice is entirely at your discretion. I am giving you the leeway and flexibility to consider your own subject interests and other commitments in deciding which slate and topic to complete. My advice on this is rather simple: *make sure to be strategic about selecting a topic*. If you choose to wait until the last slate of questions to submit a response essays – that is fine, but make sure you actually do it. The essay requirement is a pretty significant chunk of your grade, so don't put yourself in a position where you don't do it because your misjudged how busy you'd be when the last due date approaches.

Q: What is the page (word) requirement?

A: There really isn't a page (word) requirement. That being said, you are all intuitive enough to understand when you haven't done enough work. If you are able to look at your work and think that it is a substantive essay, then you are definitely in a good place. Alternatively, if you look at your work and think it is closer to a discussion board post, you probably haven't met the threshold yet. As a general rule, I would say to aim for 6-8 pages, but some prompts can be accomplished with less than that, or alternatively might require more. I am grading you on the substance of your submission – not whether you meet some arbitrary word or page count.

Q: What is the document formatting requirement?

A: For each submission I want a title page with your name, date, course number, and some indication of the slate and prompt you are writing on. Text should be Times New Roman (12pt), double-spaced, with standard 1-inch margins. Please submit your papers as word documents or PDFs.

Q: Do we need to use sources, evidence, or other outside resources?

A: Absolutely. Please use any and all accredited sources that would be necessary to articulate your points or positions. Especially if information is not common knowledge – or if you are directly referencing a word, cite accordingly and include a references (works cited) page. I have no preference for which citation style you use (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc), so long as it is present and consistent.

Q: Are there sources we should avoid?

A: Yes. Make sure that you only include reputable, accredited sources. That is a very broad definition, but it essentially means that you are free to use just about everything except blog posts and online encyclopedias (*Wikipedia*, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, etc.). If you have any questions about your sources, or if you really just not sure if the source you want to use is legitimate, don't hesitate to ask!

Q: Is there a general essay format that we need to follow?

A: Yes and no. Every paper needs to have the basics (Introduction with thesis statement, body paragraphs, conclusion, and works cited). If your paper is solely an argumentative essay, then it should definitely follow the natural essay format. However, if yours is a policy memorandum, it will be a little different. Policy memos should still have the basic foundations of an essay, but rather than flowing from paragraph to paragraph with transition sentences, you are free to separate them a bit more and approach each policy topic as its own small paper.

Q: Are there any writing tips, insights, or other advice for things we should do or avoid when writing our response papers?

A: Great Question. Here's a few items you should be considerate of:

- Avoid phrasal verbs – i.e., anything that personifies a verb in a present progressive tense.
- Avoid semi-colons – It is very (very) rare that they're used correctly, so just avoid it.
- Avoid long, run-on sentences.
- Don't include terms like "In conclusion" or "I believe that.." – The former is just lazy writing and the latter removes the sense of professionalism in your writing. State positions as objective fact and allow the reader to consider whether your positions are correct based on the evidence and persuasiveness of your writing.
- Don't let citations serve as a substitute for your contribution – i.e., if you're going to pull a direct quote from a work, it should not be a stand-alone sentence in your paper. Quotations are meant to support your contribution, not supplement it.
- **Most Importantly:** Read your paper aloud before submitting. We all write with internal voices that tend to mask choppy syntax because, in our minds, we know how it is supposed to flow. Problem is, readers don't always share your internal meter. Your writing needs to be generalizably structured so that any reader could understand the natural flow without running into confusingly structured syntax. Reading the paper aloud, like a speech, will help you identify such sentences – because it mimics how an objective reviewer would read your work.