

Ethics in US Politics (POS 4264)

Spring 2026

Professor Rosenson

I. General Information

3 credits

Meeting days and times: Tuesdays Period 4, Thursdays Period 4-5

Class location: Tuesdays in MAT 0150, Thursdays in FAC 0210

Instructor(s):

Name: Professor Beth Rosenson

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Office Hours: Mondays 10:30-11:30 a.m. and Tuesdays 12:30-2:30 p.m.

Course Description

The problem of unethical behavior involving elected officials is a perennial concern in American politics. Since the early days of the Republic, policy makers and ordinary citizens have sought to control unethical conduct such as bribery and treason. In recent decades, the focus of concern about political ethics has shifted to the problem of "conflicts of interest" between elected officials' private interests and their public duties, and to the regulation of campaign finance. This course will examine theories of political ethics, important episodes of corruption, and the regulation of political ethics through elections and legislation. The main focus will be on the ethics of legislators, but we will also look at presidents, governors, and other public officials.

Some of the main questions the course will address include: How does political ethics differ, if at all, from private ethics? What causes corruption? What have been the aims of good-government reformers? What sorts of ethical issues does the American campaign finance system pose? Should unethical behavior be addressed at the ballot box rather than through new laws? What are the limits of ethics regulation? What defenses of politicians can be mounted against the various criticisms that are often made of them, for example that they are overly concerned with winning reelection, that they are too partisan, and that they are overly ambitious and dishonest? What constitutes political courage, and what other virtues are important for public officials to have?

Prerequisites

None.

General Education Designation: none.

Course Materials

Four main books and one coursepack are required for the class. The books are all on course reserve and do not need to be purchased. The coursepack needs to be ordered online and will be shipped to you. Other readings will be made available as journal articles or other books available on the UF library website.

Books/Coursepack Required For Purchase (First four on course reserve as well)

- 1) Dennis F. Thompson, *Ethics in Congress* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995)
- 2) John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (Harper Collins (HarperPerennial): 2006)
- 3) Michael Beschloss, *Presidential Courage* (Simon & Schuster, 2008)
- 4) Stephen Medvic, *In Defense of Politicians* (Routledge, 2013)
- 5) **Required coursepack to order and have shipped for free: to purchase go to <https://y05fc0-fh.myshopify.com/products/pos-4262?variant=43996541419631>**

Materials Fee: N/A

II. Course Goals

Course Objectives

In this course we will: learn about the history of corruption in the United States, including the different forms it has taken and key episodes of unethical behavior. We will learn about the causes and “cures” for corruption. We will also study types and historical examples of “ethical” behavior by public servants, notably courage and integrity.

Student Learning Outcomes

A student who successfully completes this course will be able to:

Describe and discuss major episodes of unethical behavior by public officials in the United States (what they involved and the outcomes),

Understand and discuss the varied factors that contribute to unethical behavior, and that promote ethical behavior by public servants, according to political scientists.

Understand and discuss the benefits and costs of different reforms that have been proposed to limit unethical behavior by public servants.

Understand and apply the concepts of political courage and integrity, both in terms of examples presented in the course readings and also in terms of modern-day political life.

III. Graded Work

Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found in the [Catalog](#).

Graded Components

Students will be assessed based on four papers and two quizzes, reflected in the following distribution:

FIRST PAPER, due February 3 (5-7 pages): 18 points, 20% of grade

QUIZ #1, February 19: 18 points, 18% of grade

QUIZ #2, March 26: 18 points, 18% of grade

SECOND PAPER, due April 7 (5-7 pages): 18 points, 18% of grade

THIRD PAPER, due April 14 (2 pages), 2 points, 2% of grade

FOURTH PAPER, due April 29 – can submit earlier if you want (10-12 pages): 26 points, 26% of grade

TOTAL: 100%

Grading Scale

Letter Grade	Number Grade
A	100-92.5
A-	92.4-89.5
B+	89.4-86.5
B	86.4-82.5
B-	82.4-79.5
C+	79.4-76.5
C	76.4-72.5
C-	72.4-69.5
D+	69.4-66.5
D	66.4-62.5
D-	62.4-59.5
E	59.4-0

See the UF Catalog's "[Grades and Grading Policies](#)" for information on how UF assigns grade points.

IV. Calendar

I. Introduction and Course Overview

January 13

II. Theories of Political Ethics and of Political Corruption

Does Political Ethics Differ From Ethics in Private Life? How Have Conceptions of What is Ethical in Politics Changed Over Time?

January 15, 20, 22

January 15

Readings

Theories of Political Ethics and Corruption

* Dennis Thompson, *Political Ethics and Public Office* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 96-122 (ITEM 1 IN COURSEPACK)

* Dennis Thompson, *Ethics in Congress*, chs. 1 (REQUIRED TEXT ON RESERVE)

January 20

Readings

Political Ethics and Private Ethics

Jan. 20

* Dennis Thompson, *Ethics in Congress*, chs. 2-3 (REQUIRED TEXT)

January 22

* Dennis Thompson, *Political Ethics and Public Office* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 123-147 (ITEM 2 IN COURSEPACK)

* Molly Sonner and Clyde Wilcox “Forgiving and Forgetting: Public Support for Bill Clinton During the Lewinsky Scandal,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* (1999), Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 554-557 (journal available through UF library website)

January 27

Readings

Changing Conceptions of What is Unethical in Politics

* Beth Rosenson, “Unethical Political Behavior Viewed Through the Lens of U.S. House Ethics Investigations, 1798-2011” *Public Integrity*, Summer 2014, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 227-242 (journal available through UF Library website)

III. What Causes Corruption? Where Does it Come From? Why Does it Vary Across Different States (and Countries)?

January 29
Readings

* George C. S. Benson, *Political Corruption in America* (Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath, 1978), pp. 211-237 (ITEM 3 IN COURSEPACK)

* Beth Rosenson, "The Effect of Political Reform Measures on the Perception of Corruption," *Election Law Journal* (2009), Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 31-46 (journal available through UF Library website)

PAPER 1 DUE FEBRUARY 3

IV. Corruption and Reform Before 1920: Federal, State and Local Governments

February 5
Readings

A. Federal and State Corruption

* George C.S. Benson, *Political Corruption in America* (Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath, 1978), pp. 73-87 (ITEM 4 IN COURSEPACK)

* Robert T. Roberts and Marion T. Doss Jr., *From Watergate to Whitewater: The Public Integrity War* (Westport: Praeger Press, 1997), pp. 9-21 (ITEMS 5 and 6 IN COURSEPACK)

February 10
Readings

B. Machine Corruption

* Michael Johnston, Political Corruption and Public Policy in America (Westport: Praeger, 1997), pp. 36-71 (ITEM 7 IN COURSEPACK)

* William Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* (N.Y: E.P. Dutton, 1963), pp. xxiii-20 (ITEM 8 IN COURSEPACK)

V. Electoral Responses to Corruption: Can Corruption be Addressed Adequately Through the Ballot Box? How are Legislators Affected by Scandal?

February 12

Readings

* Scott Basinger, "Scandals and Elections in the Post-Watergate Era." *Political Research Quarterly* (June 2013), Vol. 66, Issue No. 2, pp. 385-98 (journal available through UF library website)

*Adam J. Newmark, "Surviving Political Scandals: Why Some Transgressions End Political Careers and Others Do Not," *Social Science Quarterly* (June 2019), Vol. 100, Issue 4, pp. 1268-1283 (journal available through UF library website)

VI. Addressing Corruption Through Legislation: The Progressives and the Post-Watergate Era

February 17

Readings

A. The Progressive Era, 1888-1920

*Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism* (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc.), pp. 26-66 (ITEM 9 IN COURSEPACK)

QUIZ #1 – FEBRUARY 19

February 24

Readings

B. Watergate and its Aftermath: Ethics at the National Level

* James D. Carroll and Robert N. Roberts, "If Men Were Angels: Assessing the Ethics in Government Act of 1978." *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Winter, 1988-89, pp. 435-447 (journal available through UF library website)

* House ethics rules: available at

<https://ethics.house.gov/sites/ethics.house.gov/files/documents/Final%20Version%20of%20the%20Highlights%20Overview%20Booklet%202015.pdf>

* Beth Rosenson, "The Trumps' Conflict of Interest Issues," *The Conversation*, April 19, 2017, available at <https://theconversation.com/explainer-the-trumps-conflict-of-interest-issues-75761>

* Video on Jack Abramoff to be shown in class

February 26

Ethics Regulation at the State Level, and Abroad

Readings

* Beth Rosenson, *Shadowlands of Conduct* (Georgetown University Press, 2005), chapter on independent ethics commissions (to be emailed to list serve)

* Donald J. Maletz and Jerry Herbel, "Some Paradoxes of Government Ethics Revisited." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1998, pp. 20-25 (ITEM 10 IN COURSEPACK)

* Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, "Controlling Corruption Through Collective Action." *Journal of Democracy*, January 2013, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 101-115. Available at:
<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Mungiu-Pippidi-24-1.pdf>

VII. Campaign Finance: What Does Money Buy and How Should Campaign Donations Be Regulated?

March 3

What Does Money Buy and Where Do Candidates Get Their Money From?

Readings

* Rick Hasen, "What Does Money Buy In Politics?" (from his Book *Plutocrats United*)
(to be posted on Canvas in Announcements)

* David Magelby, "Change and Continuity in the Financing of the 2016 Federal
Election," in David Magelby, ed., *Financing the 2016 Election* (Brookings Institution, 2019), pp.
1-6, 9-17 and 21-33 (to be posted to Canvas in Announcements)

March 5: Public Financing

Readings

* David Donnelly, Janice Fine, and Ellen S. Miller, "Going Public," in *Campaign
Finance Reform*, Anthony Corrado, Thomas E. Mann, Daniel R. Ortiz, Trevor Potter and Frank
J. Sorauf, eds. (Washington D.C.: Brookings: 1997), pp. 364-370 (ITEM 11 IN COURSEPACK)

* Video on clean election reform to be shown in class - <https://wvcag.org/video-clean-elections-changing-the-face-of-america/>

*Sarah Fenske, "The Dirty Truth About Clean Elections," Phoenix New Times, April 2,
2009. Available at: <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/the-dirty-truth-about-clean-elections-6432811>

VIII. Understanding Why People Hate Congress, Part I

March 10:

Reading

* John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy* (Cambridge
University Press, 1995), pp. 1-20 (To be posted to Canvas in Announcements).

* Stephen Medvic, *Defending Politicians*, chapters 1, 2 (REQUIRED TEXT ON
RESERVE)

VIIIB. Why People Hate Congress, Part II: Defending Politicians and Medvic's Response To Critics of Politicians. Or, Why Politicians May Not Be As Bad As People Think

Readings

March 12

* Stephen Medvic, *Defending Politicians*, chapters 4, 6 and 7 (REQUIRED TEXT)

IX. Beyond Ethics and Campaign Finance Laws: Virtues of The Ethical Politician (Prudence, Political Courage, and Moral Integrity)

March 24

A. Prudence, Cases of Exemplary Public Administrators, Ethical Leadership

Readings

*J. Patrick Dobel, *Public Integrity* (Johns Hopkins: 1999), ch. 10, pp. 193-211 (ITEM 12 IN COURSEPACK)

*****QUIZ 2 MARCH 26*****

Beyond Ethics and Campaign Finance Laws: Virtues of The Ethical Politician (Prudence, Political Courage, and Moral Integrity) Continued

March 31

Readings

*Terry Cooper and N. Dale Wright, eds., *Exemplary Public Administrators* (Jossey Bass: 1992), ch. 10 on William Ruckelshaus (pp. 241-267) (ITEM 13 IN COURSEPACK)

*Terry Cooper and N. Dale Wright, eds., *Exemplary Public Administrators* (Jossey Bass: 1992), ch. 12 on Marie Ragghianti (pp. 304-323) (ITEM 14 IN COURSEPACK)

April 2

B. Courage: Legislators, Presidents and Others
Readings

*John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, ch 1-3 (REQUIRED TEXT)

*****PAPER #2 DUE APRIL 7*****

Courage: Legislators, Presidents and Others
Readings

April 9
Readings

*Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, chapter 4, 6, 8, 9

*John McCain, *Why Courage Matters* (Random House: 2004), pp. 3-12 and 86-105 (To be posted to Canvas in Announcements).

*****APRIL 14: PAPER 3 DUE (1 to 2 page write up of a current legislator you consider to be courageous and why– for class discussion) *****

Presidential Courage

April 16
Readings

* Michael Beschloss, *Presidential Courage* (REQUIRED TEXT), chapters on Truman (Chapters 25-28), John F. Kennedy (Chapters 29-32),

April 21

Beschloss, *Presidential Courage*, chapter on Reagan (Chapters 33-36) (REQUIRED TEXT).

***** April 29: FINAL PAPER DUE (CAN SUBMIT EARLIER IF YOU WANT)*****

V. University Policies and Resources

This course complies with all UF academic policies. For information on those policies and for resources for students, please see [this link](#).” (The direct link is <https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/>.)

VI. Course Evaluations

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.bluera.com>

Guidance on how to provide constructive feedback is available at <https://gatorevals.aa.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/>.