

Writing Topic and Discussion Focus Question: Does America's democracy need to be updated?

This week's readings and class meetings focus on the unique characteristics of the American political system when compared to other advanced democracies. The first set of materials addresses the rigidity of the US Constitution, some of the tradeoffs of our two-party system, and the costs of using various types of checks and balances to limit the power of the federal government. The second topic looks at the institutional choices and tradeoffs that have been undertaken by other advanced democracies in the world. The discussion seminar at the end of the week tackles the question of whether America's democracy could be improved by changing one or more of the central institutional aspects of our political system (as you read and prepare for class, please keep in mind that we will be focusing on national political institutions this week; we will be looking at voter participation issues--including campaign finance--later on in the term).

Focus questions to prepare for our discussion session: Recall that you **must write a paper on one of the first unit's discussion topics. If you haven't written a paper yet, you MUST write on this week's topic.** If you are not writing this week, keep in mind that the discussion material is covered on exams, and you are expected to come to class having completed the week's readings and prepared to fully participate in our discussion.

As you prepare for this week's seminars and our Friday session, please consider the following questions:

- What are the main institutional features of America's democracy, and how permanent did our Founders expect these arrangements to be? When and why did the idea emerge that the Founders were extraordinary men who intended to make America's constitution permanent and largely unchanging?
- What are the major tradeoffs constitutional writers have to make when choosing how to structure their government? What democratic qualities were America's founders most worried about preserving? Which qualities did they see as less important or even undesirable?
- Why don't other countries copy our Constitution anymore? Why do we typically encourage new democracies to not even use our governmental model? What has happened to most other countries that have used our kind of constitution over the long run (see Ygelsias's article)?
- Why is it so hard to get legislation through the US Congress? How and why is it possible for certain, relatively small interests to stymie the will of the political majority in the US?
- Why does American democracy have so many checks and balances, and what is the norm in other advanced democracies? Are there other ways to limit the power over the government that may allow it to work better?
- What attributes of our Supreme Court stand out as questionably democratic when compared to what we find in other advanced democracies?
- Why is it quite common in American presidential elections for the least popular of the major candidates to win? What are some of the ways that other democracies avoid this outcome?
- Why is it possible for parties who represent a large share of the voters in their district to get no representation at all? Why is it possible for one party to have the support of most American voters but still be the minority party in Congress? Why is this almost always the case when Republicans have a majority in the US Senate?
- What is a proportional representation electoral system and what advantages and disadvantages does it offer when compared to America's electoral system? Why does the US have a two-party political system, and what are the main shortcomings of this arrangement?

- What are some of the main proposals out there for fixing the structural problems in the American political system, and what would be required to introduce those changes into the US Constitution? How likely it is for those changes to occur? What are some of the problems with popular fixes (See Mann and Ornstein)?
- If progressive, libertarian, or conservative legal scholars had an opportunity to rewrite the Constitution today, what changes would they likely make if they could do so without much input from other groups?

If you **choose** to write on this week's topic, your paper should be at least 1,500 words long. It will be **due by e-mail and in hard copy by the time noted in the course schedule.**

How, if at all, should America's national democratic institutions or Constitution be changed? What qualities of democracy could be strengthened by changing our institutions, and what qualities would be weakened or lost? In your answer, please consider at least some of the changes that have been proposed by conservative, libertarian, or progressive legal scholars.

To be considered as having been submitted on time, do the following:

- (1) Email your paper as a PDF or MS Word or RTF attached document (if you send the document as an e-mail message, in pages format, or as a link to a cloud server document or drive—such as Google Docs/Drive—the paper will not be accepted until it submitted in one of the acceptable formats and late penalties will apply).
- (2) Send the email and attachment to: msetzler@highpoint.edu. Include a short note explaining what the attachment is.
- (3) Make sure the message's subject line is: PSC1010 paper 1
- (4) Submit a hard copy of the paper at the start of the next class. Ideally, your paper will be stapled, but at a minimum, it should be paperclipped. Use double-spacing, and number your pages.

Before you begin writing, carefully review the grading assessment criteria for this assignment (the grading rubric for essay grading in lower division courses is on the course website, under the "Student Resources" tab). You also should review carefully the handouts on the course website addressing citation expectations as well as the syllabus policies on "Academic dishonesty" and "Using artificial intelligence assistants, including ChatGPT and similar technologies." The paper's citations and bibliography must carefully follow one of three formats most used in the social sciences: University of Chicago, the APA, or the APSA. For your convenience, my website provides a handout with many formatting examples using the APSA style. You need to use page-specific citations so that your instructor can quickly verify your interpretation of cited material. Without exception, instances of plagiarism (see the syllabus statement) will be reported and punished according to university policy.

Keep in mind as you answer this question that the main purpose of this assignment is for you to make a reasoned, well-defended (by the readings and specific evidence wherever possible) argument that engages class concepts and materials. **For you to do well on the paper, it needs to be clear that you have carefully reviewed the relevant assignment from the full week's reading on this topic** (i.e., not just the readings for the discussion day). Please **do not use any outside readings or other sources unless you specifically have cleared doing so** (i.e., you may not use the internet, unassigned authors, or any other student's work, to help you write the paper).