# Syllabus

**HKS101A  American Government**

Instructor: Thomas Patterson

In this course, we’ll examine the American political system, starting with its constitutional foundations and ending with its public policies. In between, we’ll examine U.S. institutions, including Congress and the presidency, and U.S. political organizations, including political parties and interest groups. The emphasis will be on the “big picture.” What are the driving forces and persistent tendencies of American politics? Who governs America--how, when and why?

The lectures will highlight main features of American politics, while asking you to think critically about key issues. Why are American elections awash in money? Why has the power to start wars shifted from Congress to the president? Why does the United States have more people in poverty and yet spend less on social welfare than other major democracies? In the process of addressing such questions, you will engage in **critical thinking**—an important life skill that is developed through repeated use. Case studies will be used to prompt you to think critically about what you have learned.

It is strongly recommended that you read an introductory American government text as a supplement to the lectures. Such a text will improve your knowledge of the subject and fill in details that the lectures—given the limits of time—do not address.

One such introductory text is my own:

[Thomas E. Patterson, We the People, 13th edition](https://www.mheducation.com/highered/product/we-people-patterson/M125991240X.html)

Pages from my text are listed in the readings for each session. You are welcome to use a different introductory text if you prefer. In that case, you should identify the pages related to each session’s topic.

Welcome to the course! I look forward to being with you.

Tom

Thomas E. Patterson

Bradlee Professor of Government & the Press

Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

thomas\_patterson@hks.harvard.edu

[**PART I. CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS**](https://www.edx.org/course/american-government-constitutional-foundations)

**Session 1. Political Culture**

In the words of journalist Theodore H. White, the United States was “born of an idea.” The American Revolution stemmed from the vision of a different form of government, one based on the consent of the governed rather than the dictates of a king. That founding vision with its emphasis on liberty, equality, individualism, and self-government became the foundation of the American political culture.

This session will explore the origins of the nation’s political culture, its embrace by each succeeding generation of Americans, and its continuing influence on the nation’s politics and policies. U.S. welfare and education policy will be used to illustrate that influence. The session also highlights the nature of politics—the process through which society settles its conflicts over scarce resources and conflicting values.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 1-16.

**Session 2. Limited Government**

The writers of the Constitution were determined to create a government powerful enough to meet the nation’s needs but not so powerful as to threaten people’s liberty. Accordingly, the Constitution is rooted in the idea of “limited government”—a government of restricted power. The Constitution provided for such a government in multiple ways—denials of power, grants of power, the Bill of Rights, and the separation of power.

This session will examine the Constitution’s provisions for limited government and then explore the extent to which these provisions have curbed constitutional abuses of power. The main points of the session will be reinforced by examining a set of cases, including the Watergate scandal, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and the Bush Administration’s handling of enemy detainees after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 27-52, 126-129

**Session 3. Representative Government**

“We the People” are the opening words of the U.S. Constitution. Yet, the Constitution in its original form did not give ordinary citizens a large say in the election of their officials. The House of Representatives was the sole popularly elected institution and voting eligibility was left to the states to decide. That system was gradually altered, but substantial barriers to popular participation remain, mainly in the form of state laws that define voter eligibility.

This session will explore the reasons that the framers felt it necessary to limit popular influence, will describe how and why the original system changed, and will look at contemporary barriers—gerrymandering, voter registration, and voter ID laws—that inhibit voting.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 52-60, 197-208

**Session 4. Federalism**

The writers of the Constitution created the first "federal" nation—one that divided sovereignty between a national government and state governments. We will examine this arrangement through the history of federalism as a constitutional issue, highlighting the conflicts between national and state authority that were ultimately resolved in favor of the national government.

The session will explain the division of power between the federal and state governments and also explain how broadly worded constitutional clauses, partisan differences, and changing national needs have combined to make federalism a source of political conflict and change. Among the cases explored in this session is the constitutional dispute provoked by the 2010 health care reform act.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 63-93

**Session 5. Civil Liberties**

Under the U.S. Constitution, individuals are guaranteed free expression and fair trial rights. During the nation’s history, these rights have been expanded in practice through Supreme Court rulings. A key development has been the protection of rights from action by state and local governments. The basis for this change has been the Court’s interpretation of the 14th Amendment’s due process clause.

This session will examine these developments and explain the individual rights held by today’s Americans. Major Supreme Court rulings—such as those relating to free speech and protection from unreasonable search and seizure—will be discussed as a means of clarifying Americans’ civil liberties.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 96-116

**Session 6. Civil Rights**

Civil rights refer to the right of every person to equal protection under the laws and proper access to society’s opportunities. Although Americans in theory are equal in their rights, historically disadvantaged groups—including women and minorities—have had to struggle to achieve a greater measure of equality.

This session will focus on three policies that have been instrumental in expanding the rights and opportunities of disadvantaged groups: the 14th Amendment’s equal protection clause, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and affirmative action. The last of these policies has been particularly contentious and we’ll take a close look at it, including a recent Supreme Court ruling on a case involving the University of Texas at Austin.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 132-161

[**PART II. CITIZEN POLITICS**](https://www.edx.org/course/citizen-politics-america-public-opinoin-elections-interet-groups-media-2)

**Session 7. Public Opinion**

Public opinion has a powerful and yet inexact influence on elected officials. They risk their careers if they ignore it. Yet its influence is not easy to quantify and there are many issues where public opinion barely comes into play.

This session will examine the attributes of public opinion and explore its impact on the decisions of policymakers—a subject that has been closely studied by political scientists.  The session will also explain the theory and practice of polling, which has become the primary method of assessing public opinion. Gun control policy will be used to illustrate key points about the nature and influence of public opinion.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 164-192

**Session 8. Political Parties**

Competing political parties are indispensable in a democracy. By offering a choice between policies and leaders, parties give voters a chance to influence the direction of government. As political scientist E.E. Schattschneider wrote: “It is the competition of [parties] that provides the people with an opportunity to make a choice.”

Unlike most democracies, the United States has a two-party system, the Republicans and the Democrats. This session will examine this feature of the U.S. party system and will explain the nature of today’s Republican and Democratic parties. Party realignments will be a focus of the session; they will be explained in the context of the Civil War realignment, the Great Depression realignment, and the post-1960s realignment.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 220-239

**Session 9. Campaigns & Elections**

U.S. elections differ from those of other democracies—longer, more costly, and more clearly centered on the candidates rather than the political parties. This session will examine U.S. campaigns and elections. It will concentrate on the presidential election process, given that congressional elections were discussed extensively in previous sessions.

This session will begin with a look at the presidential nominating process, which includes what’s called the “invisible primary” (the period preceding the presidential primaries and caucuses) along with the primaries and caucuses. The focus will then shift to the general election campaign, which centers on the battleground states—those that are competitive enough to be won by either candidate.  Key points will be illustrated with examples from recent presidential campaigns, particularly the 2016 Trump-Clinton race.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 239-250, 368-377

**Session 10. Political Movements**

Political movements (or, as they are also called, social movements) are a way for citizens disenchanted with government to actively express their disagreement. Unlike voting or lobbying, political movements take place outside established institutions, often in the form of protest demonstrations and rallies.

This session will examine the factors affecting the success of political movements, such as their ability to attract the resources required for sustained advocacy. Four cases will be used to illustrate the significance of these factors: the black civil rights movement, the Vietnam War protest movement, the Tea Party movement, and Occupy Wall Street.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 212-217

**Session 11. Interest Groups**

An interest group—also called a faction, pressure group, special interest, or lobbying group—is an organization that actively seeks to influence public policy. In that sense, interest groups resemble political parties but there is a key distinction between the two. Above all, parties are in the business of trying to influence elections. Groups, on the other hand, concentrate on gaining influence over policies that directly affect their interests.

This session will examine interest groups, focusing on group influence and why some interests are more influential and fully organized than others. The Dodd-Frank Act of 2010, enacted in response to the economic downturn that began in 2008, will be used to illustrate key points about group influence.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 255-284

**Session 12. News Media**

The news media are Americans’ window onto the world of politics. For most citizens, politics is a secondhand experience, something they observe through the media rather than directly. Many of people’s images of politics derive from what they see and hear through the media.

This session will examine the news media’s influence on politics, focusing on the extraordinary changes that have taken place in the news system in recent decades and on the consequences of those changes. The U.S. news system was once dominated by the television broadcast networks and local newspapers. Today, they have to compete with cable and Internet outlets, many of which operate by a different standard. News coverage of Trump’s and Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaigns will be used to illustrate key points.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 287-315

[**PART III. U.S. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS**](https://www.edx.org/course/us-political-institutions-congress-presidency-courts-and-bureaucracy-2)

**Session 13. Congress & Constituency**

The Congress of the United States was established as the “first branch” of government—the institution that would represent the people. “The people” continue to have influence on Congress. Nothing looms larger in the political thinking of most members of Congress than does their constituency---the voters in the state or district they represent. The nature of the U.S. electoral system—its single-member plurality district system—compels them to pay attention to their constituents in order to win reelection.

In this session, we will examine how their constituency affects the behavior of members of Congress, including its influence on the type of bills that members are most likely to support. The 2014 farm bill will be used to highlight constituency influence.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 320-329, 336-341

**Session 14. Congress & Party**

With its two chambers, three dozen committees, and individually empowered members, Congress is a fragmented institution. Nevertheless, there is a unifying force in Congress—its political parties. Congress is organized along party lines—for instance, the majority party in each chamber chooses the top leaders and holds a majority of seats on each standing committee. In the past few decades, as a result of a widening ideological gap between Republican and Democratic lawmakers, partisanship has increasingly defined the actions of Congress.

This session will describe the role of parties in Congress and explain the developments that have contributed to party polarization within Congress. We’ll examine the 2013 government shutdown as a case study in party conflict. The session will also explain why Congress’s fragmented structure makes it difficult for Congress to take the lead on major national issues while making it perfectly suited to taking on scores of smaller issues at once.

 Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 329-336, 345-355

**Session 15. President & Domestic Policy**

Presidents operate within a system of divided power. Although they routinely propose legislative initiatives, Congress has the lawmaking power. As a result, presidents’ ability to get their policy initiatives enacted into law depends largely on Congress’s willingness to respond. An exception is executive orders, which are issued by the president through their constitutional authority as chief executive.

This session will examine the factors that affect presidential success in the area of domestic policy. Several factors will be mentioned, but the focus will be the partisan makeup of Congress—whether a majority of its members are from the president’s party. The 1964 food stamp bill and the 1996 welfare bill will be used to illustrate the relationship between presidential success and Congress’s partisan makeup.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 363-368, 380-395

**Session 16. President & Foreign Policy**

Writing in the 1960s, political scientist Aaron Wildavsky claimed that the United States has only one president but has two presidencies—one when it comes to domestic policy and another when it comes to foreign policy. Wildavsky’s thesis is now regarded as an oversimplification, but presidents are less constrained in the foreign policy realm than in the domestic policy realm. For example, although the Constitution assigns Congress the power to declare war, the decision to send US troops into hostile action in practice rests with the president.

In this session, we’ll examine the president’s comparative advantages—for example, control over information—in the making of foreign policy. We’ll look particularly at the president’s war power and at executive agreements—treaty-like arrangements authorized solely by the president. President Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003 will serve as a case study.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 524-539

**Session 17. Federal Bureaucracy**

The federal bureaucracy has no constitutional authority of its own. Staffed by unelected officials, its authority derives from constitutional powers granted to the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Yet, the federal bureaucracy exercises power of its own, and federal agencies typically have an “agency point of view”—they seek to promote and protect their programs.

In this session, we’ll examine the federal bureaucracy—its structure, staffing, and operation. We’ll also explore the challenge of holding the bureaucracy accountable for its actions. The Air Force’s F-22 fighter jet program will serve as a case study of bureaucratic politics.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 398-428

**Session 18. Judiciary & Supreme Court**

Article III of the Constitution establishes the federal judiciary and defines its authority. Article III reads in part: “The judicial power of the United States, shall be vested in one Supreme Court, and in such inferior courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish.”

At the top of the federal judiciary is the Supreme Court, which has been described as “the world’s most powerful court,” a situation that derives from its status as an independent and co-equal branch of the federal government and from the fact that America’s system of divided powers and individual rights is a frequent source of constitutional disputes.

This session will examine judicial power and the influence of politics on Supreme Court decisions. We will also consider the normative question of how much power an unelected judiciary should have in a democratic system. The primary case study in this session will be the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), which struck down an act of Congress prohibiting independent campaign expenditures by corporations and labor unions.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 431-460

[**PART IV. U.S. PUBLIC POLICY**](https://www.edx.org/course/us-public-policy-social-economic-foreign-polices-2)

**Session 19. Social Policy**

Social issues refer to disputes over values and how we should live our lives. Social issues end up pitting people against people, which is the case today for social issues such as immigration, charter schools, police practices, gun rights, legalization of marijuana, environmental protection, and discrimination of all kinds.

Over the course of American history, no aspect of society has played more directly into social issues than religion. Social issues arise out of differences in values, and religions are founded on values. Not surprisingly, the intersection of religion and politics has been a persistent source of conflict within the American system. This session will concentrate on that intersection, historically and currently. We will explain how issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage have played out in ways that have aligned religious conservatives with the Republican Party and religious liberals and seculars with the Democratic Party.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 174, 182-187 (refresher, this pages assigned earlier)

**Session 20. Fiscal & Monetary Policy**

Since the Great Depression, the U.S, government has taken responsibility for promoting and sustaining economic growth and stability. This effort takes the form of fiscal policy, which refers to the government’s taxing and spending policies, and monetary policy, which refers to government efforts to control the money supply.

This session examines fiscal policy and monetary policy—what they are, what tools they involve, and what political divisions they create. The nature of these policies will be illustrated through several cases, including the policies enacted in response to the economic downturn that began in 2008.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 478-489

**Session 21. Welfare & Income Policy**

Few issues of U.S. politics are more contentious than those relating to welfare and income. America’s individualistic culture and federal system of government have resulted in welfare policies that are distinct from those of virtually all other Western democracies. As regards income policy, the issue has come to the forefront in recent years as a result of the widening gap between the income level of most Americans and that of the country’s wealthier individuals.

This session will describe and explain these developments, relating them to both the nature of the U.S. economy and the nature of U.S. policy. The structure and politics of the U.S. welfare system and the U.S. tax system will be points of emphasis.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 493-512

**Session 22. Regulatory Policy**

Since the 1930s, the U.S. government has been actively engaged in regulating the economy, intervening to promote economic efficiency and to protect the public from harmful business activity. This session will examine four regulatory situations and their related policies: restraint of trade, which refers to anti-competitive business practices; inequity, which refers to unfair business transactions; moral hazard, which occurs when one party engages in risky economic behavior but passes the risk on to another party; and negative externalities, which result when firms fail to pay the full costs of production activity.

Although the primary emphasis will be on policy, the session will also address partisan divisions over regulatory policy, and the basis for those divisions. Several cases, most notably the politics and policies of climate change, will be used to illustrate key points.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 465-472

**Session 23. Foreign Policy**

Unlike other policy areas, foreign policy rests on relations with actors outside rather than within the country. As a result, the chief instruments of foreign policy differ from those of domestic policy. Previous sessions examined some of these instruments, notably diplomacy and military power. This session will touch on those instruments, but focus on one that has not yet received much attention—international trade. National security is increasingly more than an issue of military might. It is also a question of maintaining a strong position in the global economy.

This session will trace the evolution of America’s position as a trading nation during the post-World War II era, concentrating first on the factors that made America in the immediate post-war period the world’s unquestioned economic power and then on the factors that weakened that position. The session will conclude with an examination of the politics and policies of trade agreements, including adoption in 1993 of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the rejection in 2017 of the proposed Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 539-547

**Session 24. Dynamics of American Politics**

This session will serve as an overview of the course, concentrating on major tendencies within the American system, such as its fragmented power structure. The importance of these tendencies will be explained by showing how thoroughly each of them affects American politics. The purpose of this session is to reinforce, and clarify, the “lessons learned” during the course.