# Note to instructor: Sample syllabus is based on 24 sessions. The number can be reduced by combining one or more of the split sessions (federalism, civil liberties, Congress and Presidency) or by deleting the policy sessions at the end. The number can be increased by splitting one or more of the single-topic sessions (for example, the session on political participation could be divided into a session on voting and a session on other forms of participation, including political movements). The sessions can also be reordered to suit your prefeence. Some instructors, for example, prefer to have their students study political institutions (e.g., Congress) before they study mass politics (e.g., political parties), whereas other instructors prefer the reverse order.

# Syllabus

**Introduction to American Government**

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.

**Text for the course:**

Thomas E. Patterson, [*We the People*](https://www.mheducation.com/highered/product/we-people-patterson/M9781265026684.html), 15h edition (McGraw-Hill, 2023), ISBN: 978-1-265-026668-4

 Each chapter of the text has brief critical thinking exercises that provide information and then ask for your assessment. These exercises are designed to strengthen your critical thinking skills. Make use of them, keeping in mind what Albert Einstein said when asked about the purpose of college. “Education,” he said, “is the training of minds to think.”

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

**Session 1. Political Culture & the Nature of Politics**

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. 1-21.

**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 the historical circumstances that prompted the writers of the Constitution to adopt these provisions.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 23-43

**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 and will describe how and why the original system changed.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 44-53

**Session 4. Federalism – Historical Development**

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.

This 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 combined to make federalism a persistent source of political conflict and change.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 55-73

**Session 5. Federalism – Contemporary Federal-State Relationship**

Changes in the economy and society have had the effect of “nationalizing” the United States and, with that, the “nationalization” of federalism – a shift in power from the states to the nations. The primary policy instrument for this change has been federal grants-in-aid to states and localities, which has effectively extended national power into policy areas once reserved for the states.

This session will explain “fiscal federalism” and how it has changed the nature of the federal-state relationship. It will also discussion the tensions between federal power and state power, and how the Republican and Democratic parties differ in their approaches to federalism.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 74-85.

**Session 6. Civil Liberties – Free Expression Rights**

Under the U.S. Constitution, individuals are guaranteed free expression. 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 free expression rights held by today’s Americans. Major Supreme Court rulings—such as those relating to freedom of religion--—will be discussed as a means of clarifying Americans’ free expression rights.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 86-102.

**Session 7. Civil Liberties – Fair Trial Rights**

Under the U.S. Constitution, individuals have a set of rights meant to assure a fair trial for those accused of crime. Originally, many of these rights were only weakly upheld in practice. Then, in a series of rulings that began in the 1960s, the Supreme Court tightened restrictions on government in order to provide fuller protections for the criminally accused. An example is the *Miranda* ruling, which requires law enforcement officers at the time of an arrest to inform the suspect of the right to remain silent and have access to an attorney.

This session will examine these developments and explain the fair trial rights held by today’s Americans. Reference to incarceration rates and the unequal application of these rights will also be covered.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 103-120.

**Session 8. 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 policies that have been instrumental in expanding the rights and opportunities of disadvantaged groups, including the 14th Amendment’s equal protection clause, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and affirmative action. The session will also describe the conditions today that contribute to inequality in law and in fact.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 121-150.

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

**Session 9. Public Opinion & Political Socialization**

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 origins of Americans’ opinions, the attributes of those opinions, and the impact of public opinion 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.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 151-178.

**Session 10. Political Participation**

Voting in elections is the primary method by which ordinary citizens exert control over officeholders. Yet, in comparison with citizens in many democracies, Americans tend to vote at a lower rate. This session will explain how the U.S. system of voter registration contributes to lower turnout rates, and which citizens are most and least likely to participate and why.

The session will also examine other forms of participation, including political movements (or, as they are also called, social movements). Unlike voting, political movements take place outside established institutions, often in the form of protest demonstrations and rallies.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 179-201.

**Session 11. 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. 202-217.

**Session 12. Campaigns & Elections**

U.S. elections differ from those of other democracies—longer, more costly, and more clearly centered on the candidates rather than on the political parties. This session will examine U.S. campaigns and elections.

This session will look at the role that political parties play in the campaign and then the role that candidates play. The influence of money and media will be highlighted, as will the advantages and disadvantages of candidate-centered campaigns as opposed to those of party-centered ones.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 218-232.

**Session 13. 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.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 233-259.

**Session 14. News Media & the Internet**

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 compete with cable and Internet outlets, many of which have a partisan agenda.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 260-286.

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

**Session 15. Congress – Constituency & Party**

The Congress of the United States was established as the “first branch” of government—the institution that would represent the people. “The people” indeed have influence on Congress. Nothing looms larger in the political thinking of many 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.

Members of Congress are also responsive to their political party. With its two chambers, three dozen committees, and individually empowered members, Congress is a fragmented institution. Political parties are the unifying force that enables members of a party to work together to achieve common goals. Congress is organized along party lines—for instance, the majority party in each chamber chooses the top leaders and has a majority on each standing committee.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 287-309.

**Session 16. Congress - The Legislative Process**

Congress has three primary functions – representation, legislation, and oversight of the executive branch. These actions take place in the context of constituency and party, as well as the nation’s policy needs. Congress has responsibility for enacting the nation’s laws, but this process is affected by the reelection and ideological interests of members of Congress and their party.

This session will describe Congress’s role in the policymaking process, highlighting Congress’s strengths and weaknesses relative to the presidency and the impact of party polarization on the legislative process. 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 well suited to taking on scores of smaller issues at once.

 Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 310-325.

**Session 17. Presidency – Evolution & Staffing**

The framers of the Constitution saw the president as the nation’s symbolic leader while also seeing the president as having a subordinate policy role. Changing national and international conditions gradually produced a more powerful office, one where the president has a leading policy role.

This session discusses the changing nature of the presidency and the circumstances that led to the change. It will also describe how the modern presidency is staffed in order to enable a president to respond to the demands on the office.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 326-342.

**Session 18. Presidency – Influence on 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. In this respect, presidents’ level of success typically depends on whether their party controls the House and Senate.

Presidents can take some action on their own, particularly in the use of military force. Presidents have also used their office as a means of building the public support that can pressure other officials to accept their lead.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 343-358

**Session 19. 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 pursue 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.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 359-389.

**Session 20. 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.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 390-423.

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

**Session 21. Economic and Environmental 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 economics of environmental policy will also be examined.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 424-451.

**Session 22. Income, Welfare, and Education 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, as will the U.S. education system.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 452-478

**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, including diplomacy, military force, and trade, differ from those of domestic policy.

This session will trace the evolution of America’s position as a military power and the nature of today’s national security policy. It will also examine the politics and policies of U.S. trade relations.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People,* pp. 479-508

**Session 24. Recap and Review**

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.

Reading: Thomas E. Patterson, *We the People*, summaries at end of all chapters