Observers of American politics often consider political parties to be the most significant American political innovation. They are present and influential throughout the political system, from the highest levels of government to the individual citizen deciding how to cast a ballot or think about an issue. Despite the fact that parties play a central role in politics here and around the world, Americans often hold them in low esteem. By presenting a broad overview of political parties in the United States, this course examines this apparent discrepancy. We will cover the key features of American political parties, examine their impact on the political system, discuss the strategic decisions made by partisans, and look at how the importance of political parties has waxed and waned over the course of American history. The United States is currently experiencing a particularly interesting period of party politics, with polarization at high levels, divided government common, and influential factions seeking to reshape party policy priorities and preferences.

We start with an overview of what parties do and why, how American parties mobilize and represent voters, and how party coalitions have changed over time. We then focus on parties in action. We look at the specifics of how parties operate in elections and other arenas such as Congress, executive-legislative relations, and the production of public policy. Along the way it will become clear that many analysts believe that democracy is virtually unthinkable without parties. At their best, parties represent and integrate a diverse set of interests, precisely as other forces in our politics cater to and mobilize narrow interests. At their best, parties represent those not well represented by other institutions in American politics and give a broad array of citizens an avenue into politics. And at their best, parties provide an incentive for politicians to work together to identify and solve important public problems. But parties are not always at their best, and from George Washington’s Farewell Address to the present day, Americans have been warned to stay vigilant in defending the nation from the dangers of party politics. Careful and critical evaluation of the success and failure of parties as democratic institutions helps us gain an understanding of what helps parties achieve these lofty goals and what causes them to fall short.

Course requirements:

Composition of Grade: Your grade is determined by a combination of a midterm exam (25%), final exam (35%), and a research paper (35%). That leaves 5% that I will use to consider various factors (class activities or materials I ask you to bring to be prepared for class discussion, for example).

Midterm examination (25%): closed-book, in-class exam covering material from the first half of the semester. The exam will contain identifications and short answers or essays.
**Final examination (35%)**: an exam covering primarily the second half of the course but with some cumulative material. We will decide later whether this will be an in-class exam or a take-home exam.

**Research paper (35%)**: a 6-8 page strategic analysis of the parties’ positions on a public policy issue. More information will be provided in a few weeks.

**Attendance and Reading**: This course works better if you attend the class meetings and do the assigned reading. You should aim to get all the reading done for a topic by the first date listed for that topic on the syllabus. If you cannot do that, the reading is listed more or less in the order in which it makes the most sense to read. Excellent attendance, preparation, and participation are all plusses when I look at grades at the end of the semester. One final, evil note: The percentage assignments above assume everyone in class is doing their part. I am willing to start doing things like giving unannounced quizzes or adjust the percentages above to put more in the miscellaneous category (which is currently at 5%) if I sense that many students are not doing the reading and coming to class prepared.

**News**: Although I do not assign any specific news reading, this class lends itself well to occasional reference to and discussion of current news events. If you don’t already, you should make a habit of following a news site, either of the major media outlets, a news aggregator like Google or Yahoo, or an aggregator of popular press opinion and analysis pieces like RealClearPolitics. I also encourage you to check the Monkey Cage, which is a blog in which the posts are written by political scientists, usually responding to some aspect of current news that lends itself to social science analysis. Not all the posts would be relevant for this class, but many will be.

**Grading system**: Numerical grades can be interpreted as follows: 93-100 = A, 88-92=AB, 83-87=B, 78-82=BC, 70-77=C, 60-69=D, and below 60=F. Grades are not curved, but there may be some upward adjustment of final grades if I believe the grade distribution is excessively low. You should not assume such an adjustment will take place. I do not in any case adjust grades downward.

If you feel there is a problem with the grading on an assignment, you will have one week from your receipt of the grade to make your specific concerns known to me. I will not negotiate grades. Research papers submitted after the due date will have 5 points deducted for each late day, including weekends. I will not give a make-up exam except in dire situations. Do not miss an exam and assume you can make it up.

Any instance of academic dishonesty ([http://students.wisc.edu/doso/acadintegrity.html](http://students.wisc.edu/doso/acadintegrity.html) has the details) can result in a failing grade on the assignment or failure of the course, at my discretion. Any instance will result in notification to the Dean of Students office. If you are having a problem it is much better to talk to me rather than violate your integrity.

**Contact**: Please feel free to come by or call during office hours or send e-mail at any time to discuss course-related or other matters. You are responsible for checking your e-mail regularly. The course website at learnuw.wisc.edu will contain copies of class materials (syllabus, information on assignments, readings). Students affiliated with the McBurney Center should contact me to arrange accommodations.

**Course Material**:


These books are on reserve at College Library. Other reading will be available on Learn@UW.
Course Outline and Reading List:

I. PARTY GOALS AND COALITIONS

Introduction (1/22)

No reading

Why Political Parties? (1/24)

Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, ch. 1
Stonecash, *Understanding American Political Parties*, chs. 1-2

Why Two Major Parties? (1/29, 1/31)

Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, ch. 2

Political Parties as Strategic Actors (2/5, 2/7)

Stonecash, *Understanding American Political Parties*, ch. 3

Unified and Divided Party Control of Government (2/12, 2/14)

John Gilmour, *Strategic Disagreement: Stalemate in American Politics*, ch. 1
Stonecash, *Understanding American Political Parties*, chs. 11-12

Party Coalitions: Polarization, Sorting, or Both? (2/19, 2/21)

Morris Fiorina with Samuel J. Abrams, *Disconnect: The Breakdown of Representation in American Politics* (2009), ch. 1
Alan Abramowitz, “American Political Parties in an Age of Polarization” (2013)
Stonecash, *Understanding American Political Parties*, chs. 4-5

Party Coalitions: Dividing Lines and Coalitional Maintenance (2/26, 2/28)

Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, ch. 7
Stonecash, *Understanding American Political Parties*, chs. 6-7

Voters: Party Identification and Voting Behavior (3/5, 3/7)

Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, ch. 6
Stonecash, *Understanding American Political Parties*, ch. 8

Catch up and Review (3/12)

**Midterm Exam** (3/14)
II. PARTIES AT WORK

The Recruitment and Nomination Process (3/19, 3/21)

Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, chs. 9-10

Campaign Strategy and Finance (4/2, 4/4)

Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, chs. 8, 11-12
Stonecash, *Understanding American Political Parties*, ch. 9

Issues and Alignments in American Politics (4/9, 4/11)

Stonecash, *Understanding American Political Parties*, ch. 10
James Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (1983), chs. 2, 13
David Karol, “Coalition Group Incorporation: The Politics of Abortion and Gun Control” (2009)

Party Organizations: Activities and Impact (4/16, 4/18)

Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, chs. 3-5
Seth Masket, *No Middle Ground: How Informal Party Organizations Control Nominations and Polarize Legislatures* (2009), ch. 4


Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, ch. 13
Sean Theriault, *Party Polarization in Congress* (2008), ch. 3

Parties, Presidents, and Policy Making (4/30, 5/2, 5/7)

Hershey, *Party Politics in America*, ch 14
John Coleman, “Parties as a Resource for Presidential Leadership: The Case of Barack Obama” (2011)

**Research Paper due** (5/7)

Conclusion, Wrap-up, Review (5/9)

**Final Exam** (5/15, 5:05pm)