In many ways, American politics is a competition between groups—between Democrats and Republicans, Liberals and Conservatives, African Americans and White Americans, native-born and foreign-born, and the religious and the secular, just to name a few. But why do we choose to belong to some political groups rather than others? And why do we dislike some political groups so much, and others not at all? Finally, why are some group conflicts in American politics short-lived, while others are so enduring? These are some of the core questions addressed by this course. To that end, we will examine the psychological and institutional sources of group conflict and cooperation in U.S. politics. Students will learn how political groups are co-determined by individual choices as well as institutional practices. The course will thus provide students with a deeper appreciation for how identities, values, and prejudices influence group behavior in politics, as well as how institutions—such as censuses and congressional districts—stimulate and channel group-based behavior in American politics.

Course Structure

Each class will involve lecture and discussion. The lectures will provide a firm context for students to ground their understanding of each week’s readings. In this way, the lectures complement—rather than duplicate—the readings. Therefore, do not make the mistaken assumption that lectures can substitute for each week’s readings. The objective behind combining lectures with discussion of the material is to strengthen students’ grip on the theories and concepts presented throughout the course. Students are therefore expected to engage in informed discussions about the material they have encountered by, among other things: 1) assessing the quality of evidence marshaled in favor of arguments made by the readings/lectures; 2) teasing out the implications of the readings/lectures for contemporary politics; and 3) identifying linkages across the ideas presented in readings/lectures.

To meet these goals, it is imperative that students come prepared to each discussion; which is to say, students are expected to read the material prior to attending class. This will ensure that any discussion of the material for the week will revolve around informed assessments, rather than “gut reactions” to the readings and lectures. The two are not the same. The former involves evaluating course material based on what the authors and instructor have actually said and presented; the latter, on speculations or intuitions one has about the readings and lectures. If you complete the assigned readings, you need not worry about meeting this guideline, as your instructor will assist you in achieving it. Thus, each of our class meetings is a collective effort at mastering the material from class. The collective part of that statement means we all come prepared ready to engage in the discussion; thus, part of your class grade will be based on the quality of your participation in class discussions (for further detail see section below on grades).

Each student will be graded according to four criteria. The first is attendance: Students are expected to attend each class. Not attending class is akin to missing an important meeting in the “real world”. It does
not reflect very well on you or your time management, so try your best to avoid it. Each student is allowed two (2) absences without any explanation to the professor. Thereafter, I will deduct points from your participation grade for each additional absence.

The second criterion used to grade you in class is participation: You are expected to actively contribute to class discussions. The key here is not a student’s volume of participation (i.e., how much one says during class), but the quality of a student’s insights (i.e., the depth of what one says during class). In other words, it is better to share two or three keen insights about the readings, than several obvious observations about what the class has read. In preparing for class participation, students should be less concerned about being “right” or “wrong”, and more with sharing their informed perspectives/views about the readings. Finally, students will occasionally take “pop” quizzes at the instructor’s discretion. These quizzes are meant to provide students with feedback on their class performance in between their short papers (see below).

In addition to the preceding criteria, students’ grades will also reflect their performance on two short papers and a final exam.

**Short Papers**

Each student will be responsible for writing two short papers based on topics offered by the professor. It is my view that, in addition to providing you with intellectual moorings, the political science major should also equip you with useful professional skills. In this regard, the ability to write analytically, concisely, and persuasively is a tremendous asset in professional politics. Thus, the objective of these papers is to enable students to sharpen their craftsmanship in the written word. All students are required to write the first paper. For the second paper, students can choose from two topics offered by the professor (please see below).

These papers are expected to be 4 to 6 pages in length (double-spaced), and they will be graded in terms of how well-organized, logical, incisive, and persuasive the analysis is. This may sound intimidating, but you will be expected to manage similar expectations in professional political settings (e.g., working for a U.S. Member of Congress). Each paper should follow the paper guidelines established by the Vanderbilt political science department. These guidelines can be found at the following link: [http://www.vanderbilt.edu/political-science/includes/PAPERFORMAT2011.pdf](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/political-science/includes/PAPERFORMAT2011.pdf)

Your choice of topics (along with due dates) are as follows:

**First Paper (due 10/3):** We will be watching Clint Eastwood’s film, *Gran Torino* (2008). Your assignment is to ascertain the extent to which the main character, Walt Kowalski, is a bigot. In other words, is he prejudiced? If so, what theory (or set of theories) that you have encountered so far best explain the source(s) of his prejudice, and why? Are there any caveats to your diagnosis of Mr. Kowalski’s predisposition toward others that are not like him? Why do these caveats matter for the theories you marshal in favor of your argument (i.e., do they challenge or clarify the theories you discuss)?

**Second Paper (due 12/3):** Please choose one from the topics below.

**Topic 1:** Immigration is a perennial issue in American politics. And the debate surrounding it is generally filled with acrimonious claims that rest on thin and equivocal evidence. Should we be as alarmed as we seem to be about foreigners in our midst? Why or why not? Given what you
have learned these last few weeks about inter-group cooperation, are you optimistic or pessimistic about America’s prospects to survive this latest wave of immigration to the United States? Please explain using readings and lectures from this course.

**Topic 2:** In 2010, our nation complied with its constitutional duty by conducting another decennial census. Experts anticipate substantial population growth among non-White Americans. What is your assessment of the decennial census? That is, given what you have learned in the last few weeks, is it generally a good thing or a bad thing for group conflict/cooperation and U.S. politics? How so? Please explain using the readings/lectures from the previous weeks.

*Hint:* One way to answer this question is to explain how and why the census might mitigate (or aggravate) political conflict between groups.

**Final Exam (Friday, 12/13 at 3pm)**

The final examination will consist of a take-home essay exam. I will develop a thorough list of questions pertaining to the course material. You are expected to answer **two** questions in total. Students will have until 7pm to turn in this final exam. The first essay endeavors to test your breadth of knowledge regarding intergroup dynamics and politics. That is, can you bring together various strands of literature from the different weeks in a nuanced way? The second essay aims to assess the depth of knowledge regarding a specific module in the course. That is, can you thoroughly explain a specific body of literature that we covered during the semester?

**Study Participation – Mandatory Extra Credit**

In order to inject some flexibility into the grading process, each student will receive two (2) extra credit points for participating in a Political Science Study here on campus (details are forthcoming). You may use these points, in total sum, to boost your lowest grade on an assignment—including your final exam (but not your participation grade). For instance, let’s say you receive an 88 (B+) on one of your papers. But you think your performance on the paper was better than that. By applying your two points toward this paper, your (B+) is now an (A-).

The additional benefit of this extra credit is that, by earning it through your participation in an actual study, you will learn about one crucial tool that political scientists use to study inter-group dynamics.

If you do not tell me what assignment you want your extra credit points applied to, I will default to applying them to your lowest grade in the class.

**Grading**

*Attendance and Participation in Class Discussions 20%  
Short Papers 50% (25% each)  
Final Exam 30%
Course Books (required)


Week 2 (9/3 & 9/5): Conflict with Groups: Personality and Prejudice, Part II (Ethnocentrism)


Week 3 (9/10 & 9/12): Intergroup Conflict – The Role of Social Identity Theory


Week 4 (9/17 & 9/19): The Clash of Group Interests - Realistic Group Conflict Theory


**Week 5 (9/24 & 9/26): Gran Torino and the Manifestations of Prejudice**

*No assigned readings for this week. You are expected to attend class, even if you have seen this movie already. If you miss class this day, and you have not seen the movie, you are responsible for viewing it so you can write the paper due next week.*

**Week 6 (10/1 & 10/3): Intragroup Conflict – Pan-Ethnic Identities and Sub-Group Tensions**


- First paper due at the beginning of class on 10/3 (Thursday).

**Week 7 (10/8): Institutions and Inter-Group Dynamics, Part I – Censuses and Economics**


- **ENJOY FALL BREAK!!!**

**Week 8 (10/15 & 10/17): Institutions and Inter-Group Conflict, Part II – Public Policies**


“When town halls turn to Mecca.” 2008. *The Economist* (December 6);


**Week 9 (10/22 & 10/24): Institutions and Inter-Group Relations, Part III – Electoral Systems**


**Week 10 (10/29 & 10/31): Intergroup Cooperation, Part I - Tolerance and Empathy for Others**


**Week 11 (11/5 & 11/7): Intergroup Cooperation, Part II – Assimilation & Socialization**


**Weeks 12 (11/12 & 11/14): Intergroup Cooperation, Part II – Assimilation & Socialization**

*To bring to life notions of assimilation and socialization, we will be viewing the film “A Better Life.” You are expected to attend class, even if you have seen this movie already. If you miss class this day, and you have not seen the movie, you are responsible for viewing it.*

**Week 13 (11/19 & 11/21): Intergroup Cooperation, Part III – Superordinate Identities**


**Week 14 (12/3 & 12/5): Tying Up Loose Ends and Final Exam Review**

- Second paper due at the beginning of class on 12/3 (Tuesday).