Introduction to American National Government

This course offers an introduction to the major institutions, participants, and processes in American politics. The focus is on how the structure of our political system conditions the practice of politics at the national level -- the ongoing struggles among competing groups and individuals for influence over government activities and public policy. We will examine the principles underlying the constitutional framework of American government, and analyze the three branches (Congress, the Judiciary, and the Executive) while trying to understand the advantages and problems inherent in a system of "checks and balances." We will also consider important extra-governmental actors, such as political parties, interest groups, and the media. In the final part of the course, we will look into important issues of public policy, and focus on economic, health care, social welfare policies.

My goals in this class are (1) to show you that politics can be interesting – even fascinating – (2) give you the skills to become informed consumers of political information, and (3) introduce you to the ways that political scientists see the world. There is never a bad time to study politics, and every year presents important controversies and challenges. We are in the midst of a presidential election, which both Republicans and Democrats see as vital to the long term health of the country (we will spend some time thinking about why every election, it seems, is the most important election ever, at least since the last election which was the most important ever). Barack Obama rode a wave of enthusiasm to his victory in 2008, particularly among young people; his compelling personal story embodied many elements of the American political creed.

This may or may not be the most important election ever, but it is certainly an interesting one. On the one hand, we have a struggling incumbent, who has presided over the worst economy since the Great Depression and who has seen much of the enthusiasm of 2008 dissipate. On the other, we have a Republican nominee who doesn’t have the full confidence of his party, and who has the lowest levels of popularity of any GOP nominee in decades. Republicans insist that Obama has failed, in large part because he is in way over his head and because he is more interested in apologizing for the United States than he is in being President. Democrats insist that Romney is a capitalist vulture who is more interested in making money than in protecting people from dying from a lack of health insurance. Republicans say that Obama doesn’t “get” America. Democrats say Romney is an extremist. Politics is unusually contentious, with almost no common ground between the parties. Most of the principals truly dislike each other.

Obama’s health care reform turned out to be one of the most controversial domestic policies in years. Democrats saw it as an absolutely vital reform of a deeply inefficient and inequitable system, in which costs are huge and growing even as millions of people lack health insurance and are one major illness away from financial destitution. Republicans saw it as an
outrageous expansion of government that does nothing to address the real problems of the current system and which was enacted via political bribes and secrecy. They have promised to repeal it. The 2011 debacle over raising the debt ceiling, in which people in both parties behaved like two year olds throwing temper tantrums, has helped bring confidence in the national government to historic lows. And in the meantime, there is still a war going on and our enemies are still trying to blow up airplanes.

The particulars of these political disputes may seem unique and new, but they are not. Rather, the reflect deep underlying tensions about the role of government, the nature of the social contract, and the particular distribution of costs and benefits of government action, that have shaped American politics since the beginning of the Republic. Even the musings of some prominent intellectuals, who wonder if the American system of government is capable of managing contemporary political challenges, have historical precedent.

The following books should be purchased, and are available at the University bookstore (though you’re free to purchase them elsewhere if you can get a better deal. Make sure you have the correct editions):

Lowi, Ginsberg, and Shepsle *American Government: Power and Purpose*, 12th edition FULL (abbreviated in the reading list as TEXT)


**You are also required to read a national news source.** You can obtain reduced-rate subscriptions to either the *New York Times* or the *Wall St. Journal*, and you can get easy access to most national newspapers via the web (Washington Post: http://www.washingtonpost.com, The New York Times: http://www.nytimes.com, Wall Street Journal: http://online.wsj.com/public/us). The exams will include questions about current national political events.

**Grade Components**

Your grade will be determined by your performance in two areas: exams, and section attendance/participation. There are two midterms, in the 6th and 12th week, each worth 20%. The final is worth 35%, section attendance and participation is worth 25%.

**Section attendance is required.** The sections are a critical part of the course: they are a useful way to stay current with the class material, and are also a good place to seek help if you have questions. Your TA will provide you with more details about what is expected.

The reading load for this class is moderate (it averages about 90-100 pages per week), and it is vital that you stay current. Some of the readings are difficult, and you can’t expect to sail through them. Readings for each week are listed in the syllabus, and you should be prepared to discuss them in section. **Discussion Sections will not meet the first week of class.**

I have set up a web page which contains information about course administration, class materials, announcements, and links to politically-oriented pages from around the Web. The page is located at http://www.polisci.wisc.edu/users/kmayer/. I encourage you to play around with it.
Course Administration

This is a very large class. You may feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of students and be tempted to fade into the background. That is understandable, but not necessary. Please see your TA or me if you have any questions or problems about the class, lectures, or readings (honest, we don’t bite), or if you are facing other difficulties. It is always easier to deal with things when they come up, and we’re actually pretty good at helping, or directing you toward resources that can help, with problems.

Here is a short list of guidelines that will help us both make it through this class.

1. Don’t be reluctant to ask questions during lecture. If there is something that you don’t understand, if I’m talking too fast, or if you want clarification, don’t be bashful: Let me know. Trust me – if you have a question, other people do, too.

Reading the newspaper, surfing the web, texting, playing computer games, checking your email or using a cell phone during class is just plain rude, and you can expect to be called on it.

Remember what the Dalai Lama says (or probably would say) about this kind of thing: if you’re here, be here.

2. **There are no make-up exams; this size of the class simply precludes this.**

The dates of the midterms and final are listed below. Clear your calendars now. Exceptions to the no-make-up rule will be made only for cases of (1) absence due to membership on an officially recognized University group or athletic team that will be out of town on the day of an exam. (2) unexpected and serious illness or injury; (3) *bona fide* family emergencies.\(^1\) (4) religious conflicts for the final. Be ready to provide documentation.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exam Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 week exam</td>
<td>Tuesday, October 9(^{th})</td>
<td>in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 week exam</td>
<td>Thursday, November 15(^{th})</td>
<td>in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>Wednesday, December 19(^{th}), 5:05-7:05PM</td>
<td>Location TBA</td>
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If you know you have a schedule issue that falls into one of the excepted categories, see me as soon as you can.

McBurney Students: Please see me as soon as you can so we can make arrangements for accommodation. I’ll need a copy of your Visa.

3. Your TA and I will always be willing to talk with you about your exam and assignment grades and suggest ways for you to improve your performance. We do our best to be consistent and fair in our grading. However, we do not bargain over grades or points, or provide extra credit assignments. Period. Barring clerical error, grades are final. That said, I will fix clerical errors.

4. I expect all of you to conduct yourselves with integrity, and have some simple advice for those of you who may be tempted to rely on short-cuts and cheat your way through this class: *don’t do it.* It is a disgrace, and grossly unfair to your fellow students. Cheating encompasses, among other

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\(^1\) A few examples of what doesn’t count: the purchase of nonrefundable plane tickets, family vacations, activities of non-University groups such as fraternities and sororities, hangovers, or 3 finals in 24 hours.
things: (1) plagiarism; (2) turning in work in your name that is not your own; (3) referring to notes or other written or electronic materials, collaborating with others, copying someone else's work, or providing answers to others in any fashion during exams. If you need more information about the nature of misconduct and university procedures, refer to the Academic Misconduct Guide for Students, at http://www.wisc.edu/students/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html. This site also provides information about your rights in the event that you are accused of misconduct.

If I catch you cheating, you will receive an F for the course, and I will see to it that your misconduct is noted in your academic record. This could prevent you from gaining admission to some undergraduate programs, may interfere with plans to attend graduate or professional school, could prevent you from obtaining a job that requires a government security clearance, and could result in suspension or expulsion. That's an enormous price to pay for a single act of stupidity. Let's not go there.

I take this very, very seriously.

If you have any questions about these guidelines or need further clarification, please see me or your T.A.
Part I: Foundations and Structure

**Week 1**
Sept. 4  

A famous political scientist Harold Lasswell (1902-1978) wrote that “politics is who gets what, when, and how.” Is this true? What does it really mean?

Sept. 6  
Individual choice, rational actors, and political outcomes.

**Readings**
- Text: chapter 1

**Week 2**
Sept. 11  
The Context and Structure of American Politics: Culture, Context, and the Constitution

**Readings**
- TEXT: chapter 2
- Reader: chapters 1, nos. 2-6.

Sept. 13  
Context and Structure of American Politics, continued

**Readings**
- Reader: chapter 2, nos. 7, 8, 10, 11

**Week 3**
Sept. 18  
Institutions and Structure: Separation of Powers and Federalism

**Readings**
- TEXT: chapter 3
- Reader: chapter 2, no. 9
- Chapter 3, nos. 12-14

Sept. 20  
Balancing Government Power and Individual Rights

**Readings**
- TEXT: chapter 4
- Reader: chapter 4, nos. 19-23

**Week 4**
Sept. 25  
No Class

Sept. 27  
Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

**Readings**
- Reader: chapter 15, no. 79
Week 5
Oct. 2,4
The Presidency: The office and Powers

Readings
TEXT: chapter 6
Reader: chapter 6, nos. 30, 31, 33, 34

Week 6
Oct 9
6 Week Exam (in class)

Oct 11
Congress: Structure and Process

Readings
TEXT: chapter 5
Reader: chapter 5, nos. 24-26

Week 7
Oct. 16
Contemporary Challenges for Congress: The Tension Between Lawmaking and Representation

Readings
Reader: chapter 5, nos. 27-29

Oct. 18
The Courts: Interpreting the Constitution

Readings
TEXT: chapter 8
Reader: chapter 8, nos. 40, 41, 43, 44

Part II: Participation

Week 8
Oct. 23
Organizing to Promote Group Values and Interests. The Problem of Collective Action.

Readings
TEXT: chapter 12
Reader: chapter 12, nos. 62, 63, 65-67

Oct 25
Political Parties

Readings
TEXT: chapter 11
Reader: chapter 11, nos. 57-58

Week 9
Oct. 30
Public Opinion and the Media

Readings
TEXT: chapter 9, 13
Reader: chapter 9, nos. 45-50

Nov. 1
Elections and Campaigns

Readings
TEXT: chapter 10
Reader: chapter 10, nos. 51-56
Week 10

Nov. 6  Elections and Campaigns (election day – did you vote?)

Nov. 8  Presidential Elections

Part III: Policy and Process

Week 11

Nov. 13  Introduction to the Policy Process: Can the Government Govern?

Readings
Reader: chapter 13, nos. 68, 71, 72

Nov 15  12 Week Exam, in Class

Week 12

Nov. 20  Health Care Reform

Readings
Reader: chapter 3, nos. 15-18
chapter 15, nos. 81-83

Nov. 22  Thanksgiving recess

Week 13

Nov 27  Bureaucracy and Implementation

Readings
TEXT: chapter 7
Reader: chapter 7, nos. 35-36
Additional: Joint Majority Staff Report, House of Representatives, A Decade Later: A Call for TSA Reform

Nov. 29  Economic Policy

Readings
TEXT: chapter 14
Reader: chapter 14, nos. 73-77

Week 14

Dec 4  Contemporary Budget and Regulatory Issues

Readings
Reader: chapter 13, no. 70
Congressional Budget Office, An Update to the Budget and Economic Outlook: Fiscal Years 2012-2022, August 2012, Summary (pp. 5-9)
Dec 6  
Social Policy  
**Readings**  
TEXT:  chapter 15  
Additional:  Richard Epstein, “Three Cheers for Income Inequality,”  
*Defining Ideas*, November 8, 2011  
Timothy Noah, “Why We Can’t Ignore Income Inequality,”  
*Slate*, September 16, 2010

**Week 15**  
Dec 11  
Entitlement Reform: the Future of Social Security and Medicare  
**Readings**  
Reader:  chapter 15, no. 80  
Additional:  National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform,  
*Moment of Truth: Report* (December 2010), chapter V,  
Social Security (pp. 48-55)

Dec 13  
Foreign Affairs and Defense Policy  
**Readings**  
TEXT:  chapter 16  
Additional:  Zenko, Micah, and Michael A. Cohen, “Clear and Present  
Safety: The United States is More Secure Than Washington Thinks,”  
*Foreign Affairs* 91:79-93 (No. 2, March/April 2012). Excerpts.  
Miller, Paul, “National Insecurity: Just How Safe is the United States?”  
*Foreign Affairs* 91:146-151 (No. 3, July/August 2012).

**Final Exam:**  Wednesday, December 19th, 5:05-7:05PM location TBD