Course Description:

This course is an introduction to American politics and government. By the end of the semester you should have a good understanding of how the government makes policy and why decisions are made as they are. The course will combine accounts of how "Washington really works" from the popular media, scholarly work on the governmental process, and debates on various political issues and institutions. This is an especially exciting time to be taking a class on American politics, with the start of President Obama’s second term, continuing debates over Social Security and Medicare, energy and global warming, gun control, how to deal with the budget deficits, and the winding down of the war in Afghanistan.

The course begins with a discussion of the foundations of our governmental system: the Constitution, federalism, capitalism and questions concerning the democratic nature of our government. Then we will examine the American political institutions: Congress, the president, the bureaucracy, and the courts. From there we turn to political participation and examine public opinion, parties, campaigns and elections, the media, and interest groups. Finally, we will see how it all fits together by examining civil rights, social policy, economic policy, and foreign policy. While the course is a lecture class (intimate discussions are a little difficult with nearly 400 students), I encourage you to raise questions you have about anything presented in the lectures.

Course Evaluation:

The grades for the course will be based on two midterms (27.5% each), attendance and participation in discussion section (10%), and a final exam (35%) (please note, these percentages will be different for students in CommB sections – see your section syllabus for that information if you are in a CommB section). The midterm exams will be a combination of multiple choice and short IDs and the final exam will be a combination of multiple choice, short IDs, and one long essay. The multiple choice and short essay portions of the final exam will not be comprehensive and only cover material since the second midterm; the long essay, which I will give you in advance, is comprehensive in nature. All reading material and lectures will be fair game on the exams.

Books and Readings:

The following books are required for the course and are available for purchase at the University of Wisconsin Bookstore on State Street. The books are shrink-wrapped together as a packaged deal.

A few additional required readings are on posted on Moodle, which you can access through your Student Center on MyUW. Also, I urge you to read a good national newspaper, such as the New York Times or the Washington Post. The national news weeklies, such as Newsweek or Time also would be useful for keeping you current on what is happening in the world of politics. I will make available to you on the first day of class order forms for the New York Times. Home delivery (to your dorm or apartment) of the Times is available at a reduced rate.

A friendly word of advice on the readings that should be taken seriously: you should complete the assigned reading before the topic is discussed in lecture. At a minimum you should complete the reading before your discussion section or you will not be prepared to participate. Also, many of the lectures will use the readings as a point of departure, so your understanding of lecture material will be enhanced by having completed and understood the assigned reading. The reading load averages about 85 pages a week. This should not be a difficult pace to maintain if you do not fall behind. If you put off reading anything until before the exams will you find yourself staring at 425 pages for each of the exams . . . this strategy is not recommended. One other thing I should mention – the reading load is not equally distributed across the weeks. Some weeks you will only have 30-40 pages of reading; other weeks will be more than 100. Therefore, it may be useful for you to try to get ahead on the next week's readings when the reading load for a given week is relatively light.

Web Sites
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W.W. Norton has a “study space” Web site for the textbook that you may find useful for the course. The address is: http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today3/full/welcome.aspx. It includes chapter reviews, study questions, on-line quizzes, links to other political sites, political blogs, vocabulary flash cards, plus other readings and resources. My homepage is http://users.polisci.wisc.edu/dcanon/ and includes links to other political sites and information about the course. Outlines of the powerpoint presentations will be posted before each lecture on Moodle.

Lecture Schedule, Reading Assignments, and Discussion Questions:
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The following abbreviations are used in the outline of assigned reading for each day: “TED” for The Enduring Debate and “APT” for American Politics Today. There are a few on-line readings that will be available on Moodle.

I. FOUNDATIONS

A. Introduction to the Course – January 22
   Preface and Chapter 1 in APT, xxi-xxiv, 3-24.

B. The Constitution – January 24
   Chapter 2 in APT, 29-63.

Discussion Section Questions, January 22-29 (Discussion sections will meet starting after lecture on the 22nd): What are the three themes of the textbook? Can you think of examples from your life that illustrate the idea that “politics is everywhere?” Why is government necessary? Do you think conflict in politics is a
good thing or bad thing? Why? What were the central problems the Founders faced at the Constitutional
convention and how did they resolve them? What are some of the unresolved constitutional problems?
What is distinctive about the American constitutional system? What are the advantages and disadvantages of
having a strong central government? What explains the simplicity and durability of the Constitution? What
are the strengths and weaknesses of the document’s simplicity? How did the Founding Fathers’ view of
people help shape the Constitution? What does Madison say about the relation between self-interest and the
nature of government in Federalist #10? What is the proposed solution in Federalist #51?

The Constitution, continued – January 29
Gordon S. Wood, from The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787, TED, 9-16.
Eric Lane, Michael Oreskes, and Sanford Levinson, “Should the Constitution Be Fundamentally
Changed?”, in TED, 70-94.

C. Federalism – January 31
Chapter 3 in APT, 69-105.
George Annas, “Jumping Frogs, Endangered Toads, and California’s Medical Marijuana Law,”
TED, 109-118.

Discussion Section Questions, January 29-February 5: What is the “liberal tradition” in America and how
did it affect the founding era? What are the key components of the classical republican outlook as described
by Wood? To what extent do these principles still shape our government today? Do you think it is good to
regularly amend the Constitution to reflect changing values and address current problems, or should the
Constitution be changed only rarely? When should the national government have the power to coerce states
to adopt national policies against their will, if ever? How has the balance of power between the states and
the national government evolved over time? How are the states fighting back to resist centralization at the
national level? What role has the Supreme Court played in this evolution (as in the medical marijuana and
assisted suicide cases)? Do you think the Supreme Court should have intervened in either of these cases, or
left those decisions up to the states? Should states have the right to nullify national policy, such as health
care reform?

D. Civil Liberties – February 5-7
Chapter 4 in APT, 111-153.
Ronald Dworkin and Bradley A. Smith, "Corporate and Labor Spending in Campaigns and the First
Amendment," TED, 158-72.

Discussion Section Questions for February 5-12: Should the Bill of Rights apply to the states as well as the
federal government? Why? Should hate speech be allowed? Do you agree with Rauch’s assessment of the
problems associated with trying to limit hate speech? If so, is all speech protected by the Constitution? If
not, where do you draw the line between protected free speech and speech or actions that may be harmful to
others? What about defendants’ rights, protections against illegal searches and seizures (as discussed in
lecture and in the textbook)? Should the 1st Amendment apply to corporations and labor unions when it
comes to political speech?
E. Democracy in the United States – February 12-14

Democracy and Participation – February 12
Howard Zinn and Sidney Hook on "Democracy: How Democratic is America?", on Moodle.

Democracy and Capitalism – February 14

Discussion Section Questions, February 12-19: How democratic is America? Are Zinn's or Hook's arguments more compelling? What are the central areas of their disagreements? How can their arguments be related to the state of American democracy today? Is capitalism consistent with (or indeed reinforce) democracy, or does it serve as a 'prison' for policy makers? Does the recent economic crisis tend to support Lindblom or Friedman? How powerful is the political elite in the United States? What is the proper role for the federal government in terms of controlling the market? How does the tradeoff between freedom and power relate to the debate about the relationship between capitalism and democracy? In what areas should government use its power?

*********** First In-Class Midterm Exam on Tuesday, February 19th ***********
(exam will cover readings and lectures through February 14th)

II. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

A. The Courts – February 21
Chapter 13 in APT, 507-47.
Alexander Hamilton, Federalist 78, TED, 284-90.
Leon Friedman, “Overruling the Court,” TED, 298-302.

Discussion Section Questions for February 19-26: Are the federal courts the "least dangerous branch?" What is the proper role of the Supreme Court in the American political process? Should they be responsive to political forces, as O’Brien discusses? What is the meaning of "judicial restraint" and "judicial activism"? Are they related to "strict constructionism"? Which approach to interpreting the Constitution, Scalia’s textualism or Breyer’s consequentialist approach, do you find more appealing? What role should the Senate play in the appointment and confirmation of judges? Should Congress play an active role in interpreting Court decisions, as Friedman discusses, or should it defer to the Court?

B. Congress – February 26-28
Chapter 10 in APT, 377-423.
Cato, Brian Friel, and Jonathan Rauch, “Pork Barrel Politics,” TED, 191-203.

Discussion Section Questions for February 26-March 5: Is Congress truly the "first branch" of government? What aspects of its operation either justify or undermine that label? Do the justifications for the bicameral
legislature presented by the Founders still ring true today, or would we be better off with a unicameral legislature? What have been the most important changes in Congress in the last 20 years? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the strong reelection goal among members of Congress? Why do Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that having a responsive Congress is “too much of a good thing”? Do you agree? Would term limits help solve the problem of an over-responsive Congress? Is “pork barrel” politics evidence that Congress is not working properly, or evidence that we are getting the type of representation that we want? What are the contrasting views of “pork” presented by the authors? How is the debate over pork related to the roles of delegate or trustee?

C. The Presidency – March 5-7
   Chapter 11 in APT, 429-62.
   Greenberg, Vanden Heuvel and Borosage, and Lowry and Ponnuru, “Is Obama a Transformational President?,” TED, 221-45.

Discussion Section Questions for March 5-12: Neustadt argues that the president’s central power is the “power to persuade.” Do you agree? Has the president become too powerful? What would the Founding Fathers say about the current state of the presidency? How are the president’s powers limited by our system of separated powers? Have these limits on presidential power changed during war time? Is Obama a transformative president? What are the different factors that have shaped his presidency since these articles were written? Could Obama have done things differently to be more successful, or was his fate dictated by factors beyond his control? What does your answer to that question say about the presidency more generally?

C. The Bureaucracy – March 12
   Chapter 12 in APT, 467-501.
   Pfiffner, Spalding, and Englund, on “Policy Czars and Presidential Control of the Bureaucracy,” TED, 264-83.

III. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A. Public Opinion – March 14
   Chapters 5 in APT, 159-195.

Discussion Section Questions for March 12-19: Does the bureaucracy serve the public interest? What is the proper standard for assessing the bureaucracy? Efficiency? Equity? How does this play out in the comparison of the DMV and McDonalds presented by Wilson? As discussed in lecture, what are the differences between “police patrol” and “fire alarm” oversight, and which do you think would be the preferable form of oversight? Do you think it is appropriate for the president to have strong control over the bureaucracy to make sure that his policy views are being implement, or should career civil servants be more immune from this political pressure? How does the debate over “policy czars” fit into this broader question? To what extent should political leaders listen to public opinion? What are some of the problems associated with interpreting the results of public opinion polls? How can question wording shape the results of polls? How did question wording influence the interpretation of President Clinton’s impeachment? Can you think of other examples how question wording influences the outcome of polls?
B. Campaigns and Elections – March 19-21
   Chapter 8 in APT, 281-331.
   Richard Parker, “Power to the Voters,” TED, 382-89.
   Davidson, Spakovsky, and Foley on “Voter Identification,” in TED, 399-414.

Discussion Section Questions for March 19-22, April 1-2: How do voters decide who to vote for? What does this view of voting behavior say about how we should interpret the results of elections? Do elections “send a message” or can we really tell much about what voters want from the outcome of elections? How do Key and Parker differ on this point? Which of the three theories of voting reviewed by Menand sounds the most convincing? Should political participation be encouraged as a “good in itself”? Why? What are the implications of requiring identification for voters? Do you support this policy?

*** Spring Break, March 23-31 ***

C. The Media – April 2
   Chapter 6 in APT, 201-233.

******** Second In Class Midterm Exam on Thursday, April 4th ********
(exam will cover readings and lectures through March 21"

Discussion Section Questions for April 2-9: How as the “new media” changed coverage of politics? Is this good or bad for the political system? How have the media changed governing? Do you think they play too much of a role in politics? If so, how could this be changed? What is the impact of media choice on political knowledge and turnout? What are the implications for politics? What is the future of political journalism? Can political news “be saved?”

D. Political Parties – April 9
   Chapter 7 in APT, 239-275.
   Fiorina, Wilson, and Judis, “Red Versus Blue America: Are We Polarized?,” TED, 439-63.

E. Interest Groups – April 11
   Chapter 9 in APT, 337-371.
   Theda Skocpol, “Associations Without Members,” TED, 478-89.
   Truman, Schattschneider, and Rauch, “Was Madison Right?”, TED 490-511 (also review Federalist #10).

Discussion Section Questions for April 9-16: What are the major differences between the Democratic and Republican parties? Would our political system benefit from stronger parties? What would are the advantages and disadvantages of stronger parties? Has Fiorina or Pomper been supported more by developments in party strength in the past 15 years? Is the Tea Party movement a good thing for American politics or is it contributing
to further polarization? Is “red and blue America” a myth? What are the various strategies used by interest groups to influence politics (as described in the textbook). Which do you think is likely to be more effective? Which of these tactics are appropriate and which should be regulated? Truman describes some of the advantages of political association and organization, while Rauch describes the problems. Whose positions do you find more compelling? Do interest groups reflect the collective interests of the nation? What are the implications of Olson’s collective action problem (discussed in lecture and the text) for the representativeness of interest groups? Do all groups have their voices heard through the political process, as the pluralists such as Truman would maintain, or are some groups unrepresented because of the logic of collective action? How can collective action problems be solved? What are Schattschneider’s critiques of the pluralism? How has the nature of group participation changed from the time of Tocqueville through the period the Skocpol examines?

IV. Public Policy

A. Civil Rights – April 16-18
   Chapter 14 APT, 553-599.
   Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter From the Birmingham Jail,” TED 142-49.
   Sarah Song and Steven Warshawsky, “What Does it Mean to be American?” TED, 29-39.

Discussion Section Questions for April 16-23: What is the best means of achieving an integrated society? Describe the progress made in the area of civil rights in the past 50 years. What remains to be done? Lincoln and King take opposing views about the place of civil disobedience in trying to promote social change. Which do you find more convincing? If you think that civil disobedience can be appropriate, how does one decide where to draw the line between legitimate civil disobedience and lawless behavior? Do you think that gay marriage should be banned? If so, what do you think about Rauch’s argument that gay marriage would not change the institution of marriage as much as previous changes have? Do you think that Song or Warshawsky makes a more convincing case concerning what it means to be an American? What are the implications of this debate for immigration policy in the United States?

B. Economic Policy – April 23-25
   Chapter 15 in APT, 605-645.
   Bill Mckibben and Bjorn Lomborg, “How Should We Address Global Warming?”, TED, 534-49.
   Matt Taibbi and Timothy Geithner, “Bailing Out Wall Street,” TED, 570-89

Discussion Section Questions April 23-30: Is the “root” or “branch” method the better approach to policy making? Which is more feasible? How does the policy making process vary by issue type and why? How does the “human factor” figure into government regulation? To what extent should the federal government have responsibility for making sure that the economy is running smoothly? Is the government responsible for providing a “social safety net,” as argued by Roosevelt? Should the market be allowed to operate freely, or is government regulation necessary? Why should the debate over global warming be considered in a discussion about economic policy? What are the drawbacks of focusing on economic growth as a central economic goal? Was the bailout of Wall Street necessary? What could have been done differently?
C. Social Policy – April 30-May 2
   Chapter 16 in APT, 651-687.

Discussion Section Questions April 30-May 7: What different techniques does the federal government use to achieve its social policy goals? Is economic inequality a central problem that should be addressed through social policy? What should be done to reform Social Security, if anything? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the various proposals? Does the recent volatility in the stock market and the meltdown of the subprime mortgage market change your views (if you support some type of privatization)? What role should the government play in providing health care, if any? Should market forces play more of a role in health care? Is Obamacare a reasonable middle ground between a national health care plan and a market-oriented system, or will it just make things worse, as its critics claim?

D. Foreign Policy and Summing it Up – May 7-9
   Chapter 17 in APT, 693-733.
   Peter Sutherland, “Reality Check,” TED, 649-56.

Discussion Section Questions May 7–10: What is the proper role of the United States in the international community? Is economic and political globalization out of sync? Does economic globalization pose challenges to the United States more generally? How do Soros and Sutherland differ in their interpretations of the impact of globalization on poor countries? Which argument do you find more convincing? How serious a threat is global terror? What are the differences between Barack Obama and George Bush’s national security policies?

*** FINAL EXAM, Wednesday, May 15th, 5:05-7:05 p.m., Location TBA ***