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.

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)


As this is a Summer course, the reading will be compressed, and it is important that you stay current. Each day, I will lecture for about 1 ½ hours, and will devote about 45 minutes to discussion (we’ll take a short break about halfway through).

**Grade Components**

Your grade will be determined by your performance in two areas: exams, and participation attendance/participation. There are two exams: a midterm on June 13th, and a final on June 27th. The midterm is worth 25%, the final 50%, and participation 25%.
Introduction: What is politics? What is American politics? What is American political culture? Values, interests, and the dilemmas of politics. 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?

Individual choice, rational actors, and political outcomes.

Readings
Text: chapter 1

The Context and Structure of American Politics: Culture, Context, and the Constitution
Readings
TEXT: chapter 2
Reader: chapters 1, nos. 2-6.

June 4
Context and Structure of American Politics, continued
Readings
Reader: chapter 2, nos. 7, 8, 10, 11

June 5
Institutions and Structure: Separation of Powers and Federalism
Readings
TEXT: chapter 3
Reader: chapter 2, no. 9
Chapter 3, nos. 12-14

Balancing Government Power and Individual Rights
Readings
TEXT: chapter 4
Reader: chapter 4, nos. 19-23

June 6
Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Readings
Reader: chapter 15, no. 79
Additional: Justin Raimondo, “The Libertarian Case Against Gay Marriage,” The American Conservative, April 1, 2011

June 10
The Presidency: The office and Powers
Readings
TEXT: chapter 7
Reader: chapter 6, nos. 30, 31, 33, 34
June 11  
Congress: Structure and Process
Readings
TEXT: chapter 6  
Reader: chapter 5, nos. 24-26

Contemporary Challenges for Congress: The Tension Between Lawmaking and Representation
Readings
Reader: chapter 5, nos. 27-29

June 12  
The Courts: Interpreting the Constitution
Readings
TEXT: chapter 9  
Reader: chapter 8, nos. 40, 41, 43, 44

June 13  
Midterm Exam

June 17  
Organizing to Promote Group Values and Interests. The Problem of Collective Action.
Readings
TEXT: chapter 13  
Reader: chapter 12, nos. 62, 63, 65-67

Political Parties
Readings
TEXT: chapter 12  
Reader: chapter 11, nos. 57-58

June 18  
Public Opinion and the Media
Readings
TEXT: chapter 10, 14  
Reader: chapter 9, nos. 45-50

Elections and Campaigns
Readings
TEXT: chapter 11  
Reader: chapter 10, nos. 51-56

June 19  
Elections, continued
Readings
Readings on Obama and 2nd terms
Others TBA
June 20  Introduction to the Policy Process: Can the Government Govern?
Readings
Reader: chapter 13, nos. 68, 71, 72

Bureaucracy and Implementation
Readings
TEXT: chapter 8
Reader: chapter 7, nos. 35-36

June 24  Economic Policy
Readings
TEXT: chapter 15
Reader: chapter 14, nos. 73-77; chapter 13, no. 70

June 25  Social Policy
Readings
TEXT: chapter 16
Timothy Noah, “Why We Can’t Ignore Income Inequality,” Slate, September 16, 2010

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)

June 26  Foreign Affairs and Defense Policy
Readings
TEXT: chapter 17
Miller, Paul, “National Insecurity: Just How Safe is the United States?” Foreign Affairs 91:146-151 (No. 3, July/August 2012).

June 27  Final Exam