Introduction to American Politics and Government

In 2006 and 2008, Democrats swept to victory in the U.S. House and Senate, won governorships and legislative majorities in many states, and saw Barack Obama elected president. In 2010, Republicans swept to victory in the U.S. House and picked up a half dozen seats in the U.S. Senate, won governorships and legislative majorities in many states, and began thinking about which Republican had the best chance to unseat President Obama in 2012. Liberal activists played a major role in producing these successes for Democrats in 2006 and 2008; conservative activists played a major role in producing these successes for Republicans in 2010. Democrats passed major policy changes while in the majority after 2008; Republicans attempted to undo some of these achievements and promote major policy changes of their own nationally and in the states with their improved position after 2010. In 2012, we saw a status quo election nationally, in which President Obama was reelected, Democrats held onto the Senate, and Republicans retained a majority in the House. Although at the national level government is divided, at the state level more states have unified party control—one party holding the governorship and a majority in the legislature—than has typically been the case in recent decades. These battles and shifting political fortunes have been about many things, including response to the policy demands of support groups and constituents; the pursuit of basic values and principles such as liberty, equality, security, opportunity, and freedom; and the exercise of political advantage while one holds power. American politics does not stand still. What are the causes and consequences of such major changes in the political landscape?

This course introduces central features of American politics and government at the national level. The objectives of this course are for students to: master the major features of American politics and government; understand the causes leading to everyday political behavior and to major changes in politics and government; assess conventional assumptions about government and politics; and learn how political scientists study this subject matter. We will consider why Americans are so often unhappy with their politics and politicians, and the challenges faced by public officials as they attempt to meet a broad array of demands from the public. Students completing the course will be well prepared for other courses in political science and should have a good grasp on key questions that confront any citizen or potentially active participant in day-to-day politics. Knowledge of government and politics are relevant for any line of employment—given the extent of government’s activities in American society, there are few fields of study or lines of work, if any, that do not intersect in some way with American government. My hope is that as you build an analytical perspective on American government that is informed, critical, realistic, and that examines causal claims carefully using the skills and tools of social science, you do not resort to simplistic and self-defeating cynicism, no matter how trendy such cynicism may seem across the ideological spectrum. American politics and government can often be frustrating and deserving of criticism, but they can also solve or address problems that may have once seemed intractable.

Course Policies

Composition of grade: Grades will be determined by a combination of in-class examinations and section activities (attendance, preparation, participation, and assignments). Final course grades will depend 75% on the exams and 25% on section activities. For the exams, I will count your two better exams at 30% each and your least spectacular exam at 15%. Grades for students registered for Comm B credit will depend 50% on the
examinations (20% each for the two better exams and 10% for the other) and 50% on section activities.

The examinations will be primarily or exclusively multiple choice. The second and third exams cover the course material since the previous exam, but the third exam (held during the final exam week) may also include some short answers or essays that reach across the course. The first two exams will be held during the regular class meeting time, while the third exam will be held during the scheduled time for our final exam. Make-up exams will be given only in rare, documented situations—for example, you have been captured by extra-terrestrial beings—that are arranged with me prior to the exam. Do not miss an exam and assume that you can make it up. Do not plan a trip during exam week and assume that will be the basis for asking for a rescheduled exam. Students affiliated with the McBurney Center should see me about exam arrangements and any other accommodations.

On the course website at Learn@UW, you will find a list of questions that will help you as you prepare for exams (found under Content/Administrative). You will find it most useful if you answer these questions as we move through the semester, rather than trying to answer them all right before an exam. For example, after each class in which we discuss the presidency, or after we have completed all the lectures on the presidency, make sure you can answer the questions in the list for that topic. This way, the information is still fresh in your mind. You should also find you need less time to prepare for the exam because you will already have a set of study notes prepared. The question list is not exhaustive, and it includes some questions we may not end up covering, so you will also want to review your class notes and other materials prior to exams.

The majority of your grade on the exams will be determined by material presented in class, but there will also be questions specifically focused on the reading. The readings discuss matters that I do not directly cover in class; these will be reviewed in section.

If you believe there is a computational problem with the grading on your exams or other assignments, you will have three days from your receipt of the grade to make your specific concerns known to your TA. We will not negotiate points on exams or assignments.

Grade thresholds are as follows: below 60=F, 60 and up=D, 70 and up=C, 78 and up=BC, 83 and up=B, 88 and up=AB, 93 and up=A. Grades are normally not curved for individual exams or assignments, but there may be some upward adjustment of final grades if I believe the letter grade distribution is excessively low (for example, the minimum A grade might become a 92, minimum AB an 87, and so on). You should not assume such an adjustment will take place. Please note that I may adjust your final discussion section grade either up or down in order to ensure that grading standards are comparable across sections.

Completion of requirements: Course requirements are requirements and are not optional. You must hand in all of the required work, including assignments that you are asked to resubmit because your first attempt was unsatisfactory. You do not have the option to “take a zero” on an assignment. Not submitting all the required work will result either in a final grade of Incomplete until the work is submitted or an F for the course, at the discretion of the instructor and the TA.

Attendance and preparation: The syllabus indicates the projected dates we will cover topics in class. Some students find that they get more out of class if they have the assigned reading done before lecture; other students find that they get more out of the reading if they attend class first. I will leave the choice to you. No matter which you decide, you must have the reading done by the date you will be discussing it in your section.

I do not take attendance in class but do strongly encourage you to attend. For one thing, the exams assume you
have attended class. For another, you’ll get more out of the course if you attend. In class, I recognize that there may be some extra-curricular activity going on during class (texting, Facebook, etc.). If you do these things, keep it to yourself and do not distract your neighbors. Most of your fellow students really do not want to be part of your personal and social life while sitting in a classroom. Please respect that.

Discussion sections: Sections begin on Monday, January 27. Your TA will explain the section requirements during your first meeting.

E-mail list: The TAs and I will distribute items of interest by email (you will be on a course email list and a section email list). Check your e-mail frequently.

Office hours: My office hours are listed at the top of the syllabus. TAs will announce their office hours in section. Please feel free to come by or call during office hours. You can send email to discuss course-related or other matters at any time.

Learn@UW: The course page contains copies of some of the material distributed in class (this syllabus, for example), outlines of class material, and some material for exam preparation. The website also contains a document listing things that students wished they knew when they first arrived at UW. Those of you who are still early in your UW career might find it useful. Those of you further along might have items that you’d add to the list—please send them to me.

Lectures: Before we begin a topic in class (for example, before we begin covering Congress), I will post on the website an outline of the lecture material on that topic. The outline for a topic will remain on the website for a day or two after we finish a topic and will then be removed. The outlines give you the framework of the lecture but do not give you the entire script. (Research shows that individuals learn and remember better when they write things down themselves.) If you wish, you can print these outlines and bring them with you to class to use as a base for notetaking, or load them on your laptop for the same purpose. Regarding notetaking, make sure you take notes that will be meaningful to you later when you are reviewing your notes, rather than focusing only on transcribing the slides verbatim. Convert the points on the slide into terms that make sense to you. I have read student notes that are precise copies of the slide text, but with no additional notes that explain the material in a way that helps the student. Make sure you do not lapse into that habit. If examples that I mention in class help make the point more clear to you, jot down a note to remind yourself about the example. Please note that the posted outlines will closely match the slides I show in class, but there may be times where I have revised the slides for class after putting the outline online.

Honesty: Any instance of academic misconduct will be taken seriously and may result in failure of the course. Students.wisc.edu/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html has the details about what constitutes academic misconduct and is worth reviewing. Misconduct will result in notification to the Dean of Students. Don’t gamble away your reputation. If you are having a problem it is much better to talk to a TA or me about it. We want you to learn and do well in this course—talk to us if you are having a problem so we can try to help you work out a solution.

Reading Material

The following required books are available for purchase at University Book Store (and elsewhere as well) and are on reserve at College Library:


If you purchased a copy of *UAPG* that came with access to MyPoliSciLab, you will find online chapter summaries, practice quizzes, and other study material.

If you have a copy of *The Enduring Debate, 7th* edition, by Canon, Coleman, and Mayer, you may use that in place of *Faultlines*—all the articles in *Faultlines, 4th* edition, also appear in *TED, 7th* edition. If you have an earlier edition of *UAPG*, neither the TAs nor I will be able to highlight the various revisions, updates, deletions, and additions between the current edition and a previous edition.

The reading load for the course is relatively moderate. The first 2-3 weeks are the heaviest load of the semester, so don’t fall behind. Although the list below is largely final, I may make minor revisions as we go along.

*Outline and Reading List:*

**I. FOUNDATIONS**

*Course Introduction/Political Culture and the Framework of American Politics* (1-21, 1-23, 1-28)

*UAPG*, chs. 1-2

What Does It Mean to Be an American? (*Faultlines*, ch. 1)

Eric Liu, “Sworn-Again Americans”

Steven Warshawsky, “What Does It Mean to Be an American?”

Daniel J. Elazar, “The Three Political Cultures”

(Note: In *Faultlines*, in addition to reading the articles, you should read the editors’ comments introducing a chapter. These comments provide an overview of the readings.)

Is Income Inequality a Problem? (*Faultlines*, ch. 13)

Timothy Noah, “Why We Can’t Ignore Growing Income Inequality”

Richard A. Epstein, “Three Cheers for Income Inequality”

Complete the Section Assignment posted at Learn@UW and bring to your first section meeting (sections begin meeting on Monday, January 27)

*The Constitution and Federalism* (1-30, 2-4, 2-6)

The following three readings (the Declaration, Constitution, and Federalist Papers) should be read prior to class. Do not read these primarily to memorize but to get a sense of each document as a whole:

Annotated Declaration of Independence, Learn@UW

*The Declaration tries to establish common ground among the colonists and build a shared sense of nationhood.*

Annotated Constitution of the United States, Learn@UW

*The Constitution builds a governance framework with a more comprehensive set of national institutions, including an executive and judicial branch of government.*

Annotated Federalist nos. 10 and 51, Learn@UW

*The Federalist Papers build a justification for the Constitution based on theory and an analysis of how government works in practice. Nos. 10 and 51 argue that the proposed Constitution defends liberty rather than threatens it.*

_The Articles preceded the Constitution and were the first attempt to create a governance framework for the states to work collaboratively on defense, commerce, and other issues._

*UAPG*, chs. 3-4

How Democratic is the Constitution? ([*Faultlines*, ch. 2])
Sanford Levinson, “The Ratification Referendum: Sending the Constitution to a New Convention for Repair”
Eric Lane and Michael Oreskes, “We”

**Civil Liberties and Civil Rights (2-11, 2-13, 2-18)**

*UAPG*, chs. 5-6

Same-Sex Marriage ([*Faultlines*, ch. 4])
Ross Douthat, “The Marriage Ideal”
Justin Raimondo, “The Libertarian Case Against Gay Marriage”
Jonathan Rauch, “Objections to These Unions”

**II. INSTITUTIONS**

**Congress (2-20, 2-25)**

*UAPG*, ch. 13

Pork-Barrel Politics ([*Faultlines*, ch. 5])
Brian Friel, “Inhofe: Earmarks are Good for Us”
Jonathan Rauch, “Earmarks Are a Model, Not a Menace”

**FIRST EXAMINATION** (2-27, 11am: Introduction/Political Culture through Congress)

**Presidency (3-4, 3-6)**

*UAPG*, ch. 14

David Greenberg, “The Honeymooners” (in [*Faultlines*, ch. 6])
Prospects, Possibilities, and Perils in Obama’s Second Term ([*Faultlines*, ch. 6])
Adam Clymer, “Triumphant Obama Faces New Foe in ‘Second-Term Curse’”
Tim Cavanaugh, “Beware Obama’s Big Ideas”
Akhil Reed Amar, “Second Chances”

**Courts (3-11, 3-13)**

*UAPG*, ch. 15

Originalism or a Living Constitution? ([*Faultlines*, ch. 8])
Antonin Scalia, “Constitutional Interpretation the Old-Fashioned Way”
Stephen Breyer, “Our Democratic Constitution”
III. ACCESS AND INFLUENCE

Public Opinion and the Media (3-25, 3-27, 4-1)

*UAPG*, chs. 7 and 10
The Future of Political Journalism (*Faultlines*, ch. 9)
Paul Starr, “Goodbye to the Age of Newspapers (Hello to a New Era of Corruption)”
James Fallows, “How to Save the News”

**SECOND EXAMINATION** (4-8, 11am: Presidency through Public Opinion and the Media)

Elections and Voting (4-3, 4-10, 4-15)

*UAPG*, chs. 8-9
Voter Identification (*Faultlines*, ch. 10)
Chandler Davidson, “The Historical Context of Voter Photo-ID Laws”
Hans Von Spakovsky, “Requiring Identification by Voters”
Edward Foley, “Is There a Middle Ground in the Voter ID Debate?”

Political Parties (4-17, 4-22)

*UAPG*, ch. 11
Red America versus Blue America: Are We Polarized? (*Faultlines*, ch. 11)
Morris P. Fiorina, “What Culture Wars? Debunking the Myth of a Polarized America”
James Q. Wilson, “How Divided Are We?” (read also Fiorina’s response to Wilson, “Polarized America?”)
John B. Judis, “Tea Minus Zero”

Interest Groups (4-24, 4-29)

*UAPG*, ch. 12
James Madison, Annotated *Federalist* No. 10, Learn@UW
Corporate and Labor Spending in Campaigns and the First Amendment (*Faultlines*, ch. 12)
Ronald Dworkin, “The Decision That Threatens Democracy”
Bradley Smith, “*Citizens United* We Stand”
Matt Bai, “How Much Has *Citizens United* Changed the Political Game?”

Bureaucracy and Public Policy (5-1, 5-6)

*UAPG*, chs. 16-17
Health Care Reform (*Faultlines*, ch. 14)
Marilyn Werber Serafini, “Grading Health Care Reform: Experts Assess Whether the Bill Delivers on Its Promises”
Yuval Levin, “Repeal: Why and How Obamacare Must Be Undone”
George E. Condon, Jr., “Even After Big Victory, Health Care Future Uncertain”

Review Session (5-8, during regular class meeting time)

**THIRD EXAMINATION** (5-16, 12:25 pm: Elections and Voting through Bureaucracy and Public Policy)