Goals and Structure

This Honors Class in “Introduction to American Government” will concentrate on three goals, and it is the combination of these three, rather than the load in any one, that should distinguish the class:

- The first is, of course, to acquire the basics for understanding and interpreting American politics. Here, there is a set of topics—the separation of powers, nomination by primary election, and so forth—that any knowledgeable person would have to master. We shall master them, too. Accordingly, the most formal part of our sessions will be directed to this goal, through lectures on key topics. So, in part, will the readings, though you will probably have other uses for them as well. A major examination will test achievement of this goal. This is the institutional backdrop to American politics. An understanding of it ought to stay with you for a long time.

- The second goal is to attain some familiarity with the evolution of American politics during ‘our time’—which will mean, for this class, the end of the Second World War through December of 2014. This goal is based on the belief that interpretation of modern American politics is almost impossible without understanding where it came from, that is, the sequence and context of its development. There will be readings focused on this as well, and later lectures
will address it explicitly. There will be a minor examination testing this goal directly. There will also be a serious term paper that will help to integrate both halves of the class.

- And the third goal is to apply the understandings gained from class lectures and research projects to the events of politics as they unfold during our time together. In other words, if we get the first part of the class right—if the things we are addressing through lectures and readings really are essential to understanding American politics—then it ought to be possible to observe them ‘in action’ as we go about our business. At the same time, serious students of current affairs ought to move from being a glorified cheering section (hurrah for my heroes, boo for yours) to being informed observers, who begin to understand why political actors do what they do. Daily reading of a national newspaper will be the major tool here, followed by discussion during most class periods.

In this regard, the fall semester of 2014 has its own distinctive place in the chronicle of American politics. In formal terms, we are going to be in class together during the final session of the 113th Congress. If history is any guide, this Congress will likely spend less time in Washington, legislating, and more time on the road, campaigning. So we shall closely follow the mid-term elections of 2014, the second mid-term of the Obama Presidency. Their outcome will almost surely influence political life in the United States for the next two years. At the same time, we will also get to observe the policy agenda for the new term of the Supreme Court, plus all the spontaneous developments, domestic but especially international, that can never be foreseen but that always color American politics in major ways.
In any case, a weekly class ought to have three parts. Number one is a formal lecture on the main focus of the day. This is the largest part, though as you will see, even it varies substantially in the course of the semester. Number two is some planning for, and then collective help with, the term paper, plus any other administrative business that we need to do. For several classes, specialists will visit us (or we will visit them) to offer advice on developing a serious research project. And number three is discussion of current events since we last met, not for their own sake, much less for how we feel about them, but for how they fit with—or stress—the other things that we are learning along the way. The pages that follow set all three of these elements out.

In return, your responsibilities are: first, to do the assigned readings and attend class; second, to get an early start on the term paper; and third, to read a national newspaper regularly, by which I mean The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal, or The Financial Times. Note that most of these can be read on the web rather than from the newsstand if you prefer. While I believe that it is more productive to read your chosen paper in hard copy, I do not insist on it. Likewise, while I believe that missing lectures in the first half of the class is self-destructive, I do not insist on attendance. For the second half, I do.

The final pages in this packet address possibilities for the term paper, and the paper itself is discussed there. But note again the organization of the class, which I have tried to adjust so as to make your responsibilities as easy to meet as possible:
• The first eight weeks cover the absolute fundamentals of American government. We shall try to acquire these basics while simultaneously setting up the term papers. Readings are important, but the substance of these lectures is even more critical to the main examination. The ninth week is then an examination covering all these basics. Note that this exam, not the one in the exam period, is the major one for the class.

• In the six weeks that follow, I shall try to put all these elements back together in a more comprehensive fashion, through lectures aimed at the bigger picture. These lectures are video-based, that is, supported by campaign advertisements from the television era. They are meant to place modern politics in the context of postwar political history, while taking some of the load off your shoulders during the period when you should be working intensively on the paper.

A shorter examination during our scheduled exam time will cover the shorter half of the class, the one involving a postwar overview. And in the end, grades will be based 40% on the main examination, 40% on the term paper, and 20% on this shorter exam at the end. There will be an additional 5%, a potential ‘bonus’ or ‘cushion’, that is meant to recognize positive classroom contributions, as with helpful discussion of relevant current events in particular. Term papers are due on or before the final exam date for the class.
Political Science 184
Class Program

Week 1. Lecture: “What Kind of Government?”
   Work Session: Introduction of Class Members

Week 2. Lecture: “What Kind of Society?”
   Work Session: Introduction of Paper Topics

Week 3. Lecture: “What Kind of Politics?”
   Work Session: Discussion of Paper Topics

Week 4. Lecture: “The Presidency”
   Work Session: Researching Scholarly Papers, Memorial Library

Week 5. Lecture: “Congress”
   Work Session: Reference Lessons for the Papers

   Work Session: Paper Synopsis

Week 7. Lecture: “Political Parties”
   Work Session: Writing Scholarly Papers, The Writing Center

Week 8. Lecture: “The Bureaucracy, Interest Groups, & Mass Media”
   Work Session: Exam Preparations

Week 9. Major Examination

Week 10. Lecture: “The Late New Deal Era”
   Work Session: Examination Review

   Work Session: Return to Term Papers

Week 12. Lecture: “The Clinton Years”
   Work Session: Trouble-Shooting the Papers

Week 13. Thanksgiving Holiday

Week 14. Lecture: “The Bush Years”
   Work Session: Advanced Trouble-Shooting

Week 15. Lecture: “The Obama Years—and After?”
   Work Session: Final Organizing Details
Political Science 184

Reading List

Part I
Background to American Politics

Week 1. September 5. What Kind of Government?
   “Constitutional Foundations”, Chapter 1 &
   “American Federalism”, Chapter 2 in
   David B. Magleby & Paul C. Light, Choices: Honors Intro to American
   Government

Week 2. September 12. What Kind of Society?
   Seymour Martin Lipset, “American Exceptionalism Reaffirmed”, Chapter 1
   in Byron E. Shafer, ed., Is America Different? A New Look at
   American Exceptionalism
   “What is the American Way? Four Themes in Search of Their Next
   Incarnation,” Chapter 10 in
   Byron E. Shafer, The Two Majorities and the Puzzle of Modern
   American Politics

   “Public Opinion, Participation, and Voting”, Chapter 3 in
   Magleby & Light, Choices: Honors Intro
   “Public Opinion and the Media”, Chapter 6 in

Part II
Fundamentals of American Government

Week 4. September 26. The Presidency
   “The Presidency”, Chapter 5 in
   Magleby & Light, Choices: Honors Intro
   “The Presidency”, Chapter 10 in
   Wilson, American Government

Week 5. October 3. Congress
   “Congress”, Chapter 4 in
   Magleby & Light, Choices: Honors Intro
   “Congress”, Chapter 9 in
   Wilson, American Government
Week 6. October 10. *The Courts*
“The Judiciary”, Chapter 6 in
Magleby & Light, *Choices: Honors Intro*
“The Judiciary”, Chapter 12 in
Wilson, *American Government*

Week 7. October 17. *Political Parties*
“Political Parties?”, Chapter 7 in
Magleby & Light, *Choices: Honors Intro*
“Political Parties and Interest Groups”, Chapter 7 in
Wilson, *American Government*

“The Bureaucracy”, Chapter 11 in
Wilson, *American Government*
“Interest Groups”, Chapter 8 &
“The Media and U.S. Politics”, Chapter 9 in
Magleby & Light, *Choices: Honors Intro*

Week 9. October 31. Examination

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Part III
The Pattern of Modern American Politics

Week 10. November 7. *The Late New Deal Era*

“The Search for a New Center”, Chapter 2 in Shafer, *The Two Majorities*

Week 12. November 21. *The Clinton Years*

Week 13. November 28. Thanksgiving Holiday
No assigned reading

Week 14. December 5. *The Bush Years*
Week 15. December 12. *The Obama Years*
Byron E. Shafer, “The Three Worlds of Postwar American Politics: Political Orders and Scholarly Eras”
Political Science 184
Term Paper Outline

Much of Political Science 184 is devoted to larger aspects and continuing trends in American politics, those things that, if they are not constant, are obviously important at a given point in time and reasonably stable across time as well. Yet American politics has also changed substantially during the years since the Second World War, and this paper is intended to focus on some major aspect of that change, of how we got from ‘then’ to ‘now’.

The major institutions of American national government—the Presidency, Congress, and the Court—work differently now than they did then. The major intermediaries of American politics—political parties, interest groups, and mass media of information—work differently now than they did then. The very nature of American society—its total population, its key social groups, the concerns of their members—is different.

So is the substance of public policy, the things about which people fight within that politics. Economic policy, about the distribution of material goods, is different. Cultural policy, about proper standards of behavior, is different as well. Foreign affairs, civil rights, trade, the environment, taxation, criminal justice, social welfare, civil liberties, macroeconomics, education, family structure: all have come onto (and gone off) the policy dial.

A term paper addressing one of these changes needs to do four things. First, it needs to describe the situation in the years following the Second World War, roughly 1946-1966. Second, it needs to describe the situation in recent years,
roughly 1994-2014. Third, it needs to note what has changed, and to try to say something about why. And fourth, it needs to conclude by saying why the change matters.

These are not intended to be long papers. Think in terms of 25 pages, with a 20-page minimum and a 30-page maximum. But remember: at that length, the need to have three clear sections (then, now, and change), a paragraph or two of introduction, plus a short conclusion will force some careful thinking about what is important and what is not.

Note that this also implies a trade-off in picking topics. Small and focused topics are easier to write and easier to work into the required format. But they also require more digging in their research. Larger and less focused topics make it easier to amass information. But they are much harder to ingest, to organize, and to present concretely and in detail. On balance, smaller and more focused topics are likely to serve you better, but I shall suggest a variety of possibilities of both sorts.

Lastly, you are welcome to develop an existing interest by way of this paper. But note that the detachment necessary to write such a paper may be easier to sustain in a topic or area which you do not (at least, not at the moment) regard as emotionally important, as opposed to a topic or area which you do. I shall say some things in our first class session about how a self-conscious political scientist ought to think about such matters.

With that as background, here are some topics that I can recommend for a term paper in this class. Any one of these will be acceptable, and most offer many different ways to address them. They may suggest other topics to you that are not
on the list, and these can easily be acceptable too, as long as we discuss them first. All we need is to be agreed that they have the same general scope as those already on the list. Every year, a goodly share of the class studies one of these topics of their own choosing.
The Presidency

Presidential Nominations and/or Elections
Organization of the White House Office
Presidential Policy Selection
Presidents in Economic Policy
Presidents in Foreign Policy
Presidents in Social Policy

Congress

Congressional Elections
Committee Organization
Floor Organization and Leadership
Congress in Economic Policy
Congress in Foreign Policy
Congress in Social Policy

The Supreme Court

Judicial Selection
Court Operations
Decision-Making
Courts in Economic Policy
Courts in Foreign Policy
Courts in Social Policy
Society

Population Growth and Decline
Social Group Advance and Retreat
‘Exceptionalism’

Political Participation

Economic Policy Divisions among the Public
Foreign Policy Divisions among the Public
Social Policy Divisions among the Public

Political Parties

Mass Public Identifications with Parties
Group Attachments to Parties
Nature of Party Organizations
Partisan Fund-Raising
Evolution of Party Factions
The Major Parties and Economic Policy
The Major Parties and Foreign Policy
The Major Parties and Social Policy

Interest Groups

Main Organized Interests, Growth and Decline
Lobbying National Government
Organized Interests in Electoral Politics
Evolution of Major Interest Group(s)
Organized Interests and Economic Policy
Organized Interests and Foreign Policy
Organized Interests and Social Policy

Mass Media of Information
Changing Mix of Media
Television News and National Politics
Radio News and National Politics
Newspaper News and National Politics
Press Coverage of National Government
Government Use of Mass Media

Governance
Size and Role of National Government
Federalism and Its Evolution
Separation of Powers
Divided Government (Split Partisan Control)