INTRO TO AMERICAN POLITICS
Foundations, Institutions, and Behavior

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Political Science

OVERVIEW

This course is a survey of American politics and government. Topics are divided into three broad categories. First, we will examine the American founding, the Constitution, and what it means to have a federal system of government. Second, we will consider American political institutions – Congress, the presidency, the bureaucracy, the judiciary – and policymaking. Third, we will study American political behavior and the interactions of behavior with political institutions on issues including voting, political parties, interest groups, public opinion, politicized identity, the media, and inequality.

More broadly, the lectures, discussions, primary source readings, and scholarly readings will help us achieve a few course goals. First, we will gain an improved ability to make sense of how American politics works (or doesn’t work!). Second, we will compare arguments and theories offered by various authors, critically evaluating their usefulness for describing American politics. Third, we will place the ideas from the readings into the context of present-day current events in politics. Finally, as a more general goal for the course, I hope that we all can take a step forward toward becoming more politically critical, informed, and engaged citizens. Politics can be maddening, but it becomes more interesting and fun when you can make some sense of what is going on.

Our activities in class may take a number of formats. While we will often have lectures, depending on the topic there may also be discussions, debates, and/or small group work. Political concepts and topics often may reveal differences of opinion – this is particular true around election years! So even as some of us may have strong views and potentially disagree, I ask that we listen to each other’s viewpoints while working to ensure that civility and respect for each other are always present in our conversations.

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Students are expected to complete the readings, come to lecture, and participate in class. There will be two paper assignments with three choices of topics for each. The papers should be 5 pages double-spaced. Be sure to have a clear argument and use evidence to support your claims. In addition, there will be a final exam for the course. The grade breakdown is as follows:

- Participation – 20%
- 2 Response Papers – 50%
- Final Exam – 30%

* In drafting this syllabus, I have partly drawn upon two syllabi for “Intro to American Politics” at Yale created by Rachel Silbermann (Fall 2015) and Katherine McCabe (Spring 2017).
COURSE OUTLINE

I. FOUNDATIONS

Week 1-2: The Founding & the Constitution


Primary Sources:
   Articles of Confederation (1777)
   Constitution (1787)
   Bill of Rights (1789)
   Federalist # 10, 51 (1787, 1788)
   Anti-Federalist # 3 (1787)

Week 2: Federalism


David Brian Robertson, The Original Compromise: What the Constitution’s Framers Were Really Thinking (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Ch. 13

Primary Sources:
   Federalist # 16, 17, 39, 45 (1787, 1788)
   McCulloch v. Maryland (1819)

PAPER 1A – How was the Constitution a product of political compromise? Were these compromises justified? How would you want to reform the Constitution today, if at all?

II. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Week 3: Congress

David R. Mayhew, Congress: The Electoral Connection (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), Ch. 1


**Primary Sources:**

*Federalist* # 53, 56-58, 62-63 (1787, 1788)

**Week 4: The Presidency and the Bureaucracy**


Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), Ch. 3


**Primary Source:**

*Federalist* # 70

**PAPER 1B** – Imagine you are advising President Trump. Some of the main items that he would like to work with Congress to pass include health care reform, infrastructure spending, and tax reform. Write a memo on what factors will influence his or her ability to achieve his agenda. Be sure to distinguish which factors are more under the president’s control and which are not. Which items, if any, should be easier for him to achieve and which will pose more difficulty?

**Week 5: The Judiciary, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties**


*Primary Sources:*

*Federalist # 78 (1788)*  
*Marbury v. Madison (1803)*  
*Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)*  
*Brown v. Board of Education (1954)*  
*University of California Board of Regents v. Bakke (1978)*  
*Obergefell v. Hodges (2015)*  
*Griswold v. Connecticut (1965)*  
*Roe v. Wade (1973)*  
*Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. (2014)*

**PAPER 1C** – Should Supreme Court justices narrowly interpret the Constitution based on originalism or should they interpret the Constitution as a “living” document with meaning for contemporary times? Be sure to address the pros and cons of both approaches.

**Week 6: Policymaking and Policy Feedback**


**III. POLITICAL BEHAVIOR**

**Week 7: Voting and Participation**


Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, “The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment,” *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (September 2000): 653-663

Mirya R. Holman and Monica C. Schneider, “Gender, race, and political ambition: how intersectionality and frames influence interest in political office,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6, no. 2 (June 2018): 264-280

**PAPER 2A** – Imagine you need to motivate your fellow college students to vote. What techniques would be more effective and what techniques would be less effective? In explaining your preferred techniques, please be as specific as possible as to how they would work.

**Week 8: Political Parties and Polarization**


**Primary Source:**

American Political Science Association, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System,” supplement to *American Political Science Review* 44, no. 3 (September 1950), pp. 1-14

**Week 9: Interest Groups**


*Primary Source:*


**Week 10: Public Opinion**


**Week 11: Politicized Identity and Intersectionality**


**Week 12: Media and Social Networks**


**PAPER 2B** – Are Americans polarized or sorted? Are all Americans equally polarized? How do parties, the media, and voters’ identities potentially affect partisan polarization?

**PAPER 2C** – How does the media affect citizens’ knowledge, perceptions, and political behavior? Should the media be reformed, and if so, how? If not, why not?

**Week 13: Inequality and Representation**


Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (September 2014): 564-581


**FINAL EXAM**

- Identifications – Choose 10 of 15 – 40%
- Short Essay – 20%
  - What is one thing about current political events today that this course has made you understand and how?
- Long Essay – Choice from two questions – 40%