

American National Government

POLS 206, Spring 2015

Section 504 (TR, 9:35am-10:50am, Blocker 102)

Section 505 (TR, 11:15am-12:25pm, Chemistry 100)

3.0 Credit Hours

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Overview

This course provides students with an overview of important dynamics and institutions in American government and politics through the perspective of political science.

We begin with a general discussion of the purposes of politics and the aspiration of the American political system to “establish justice” and allow individuals to fulfill their rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Next, we will investigate how individuals translate their preferences into market and political choices, how these behavioral patterns create needs for institutions to structure choices, and how choices over institutions influence choices over outcomes. Next, we will analyze the historical development of a particular set of institutions established by the United States Constitution. We will then turn our attention to contemporary American politics and investigate the political behavior of the American public and try to understand the dynamics of public opinion over time. Finally, we will study some features of the various institutions of national government and investigate how those institutions are influenced by the public and interest groups. Also, throughout the course, I will work to introduce you to important analytic concepts that will be useful to you in understanding political dynamics in general and as citizens and as students pursuing higher level course work in political science or related fields.

Prerequisites

None

Texts and Reading

Reading is absolutely essential for learning, and it is an important part of this course. All reading assignments are mandatory for all students in this class. All material covered in any reading assignment may be included on exams.

The reading assignments for the course reflect two related goals. The first is to expose you to the basic elements of American politics and government seen through the lens of political science. The second is to show you how these academic concepts play out in real-world politics. There is a textbook for the course, which is available at the university bookstore as well as through most online booksellers:

The American Political System (3rd Edition) by Ken Kollman. 2017. New York: W.W. Norton.

I have selected this particular text because of its approach to explaining the linkages between the numerous and elaborate institutions of American government and a small set of recurring problems that arise from the seemingly simple task of having groups of people choose a common course of action. These “collective dilemmas” arise from the difficulties inherent in making group decisions despite differences among individual interests and preferences. In turn, political institutions emerge as solutions to the collective action problems, that is, as vehicles for overcoming the costs and obstacles that might otherwise prevent productive and peaceful group decision-making. This text is valuable because of its description of these social choice problems and its continuing emphasis on the ways that the institutions of American government attempt to address them.

A second set of readings will come from *The Federalist*, a collection of essays written by John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison in 1787 and 1788 to support ratification of the United States Constitution by New York. *The Federalist* essays are, as a group, considered one of the most cogent and most important discussions of the principles and logic which motivated the major features of the Constitution. *The Federalist* is available for free from a variety of sources online. I prefer this [version](#), maintained by the Liberty Fund, which can also be downloaded as an e-book. You are welcome to purchase a hard copy, though, if you like.

All other course readings are available online. Links to these readings are provided in the syllabus. If a link is not working, please let me know.

All reading assignments from this textbook should be completed before the week indicated in the syllabus (i.e. you should complete all reading for week two before the second week of class).

Office Hours and Communications

I will hold regular office hours as indicated above. You may visit me in my office during those times without prior appointment to discuss questions you may have about lectures, reading assignments, examinations, current events, or other academic matters. Also, if your schedule does not permit you to attend my regular office hours, or if you care to discuss something in-depth, you may schedule a meeting with me at another time. To schedule a meeting, contact me via e-mail.

This semester, I will be teaching two courses with a total enrollment of about 600 students in addition to other administrative responsibilities in my department. These obligations mean that my attention is likely to be a scarce resource, and I encourage you to utilize it efficiently. I advocate attending my office hours—which are dedicated times for me to spend with you on issues concerning this course—if you have questions, since this will guarantee an immediate response to your inquiries.

You may also contact me via e-mail, and I will do my best to respond to you within 48 hours. However, during periods of “high traffic,” this may be delayed somewhat.

Because of computer security concerns, I will only open e-mail from official Texas A&M e-mail addresses. Also, I use a system of automated e-mail filters to track electronic correspondence from students. To ensure that I receive your e-mail, please include the class number and

section number (e.g. POLS 206-504) in the e-mail's subject line. If you do not do this, your e-mail will not be directed correctly, and it may delay or prevent me from responding.

Academic Dishonesty

The Aggie Honor Code states, "An Aggie does not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do."

Students should be aware of and take seriously their obligations to perform original academic work, give appropriate credit to sources, and to use only authorized aid and materials. Please review the Aggie Honor Code and rules regarding academic conduct. These may be found online at <http://aggiehonor.tamu.edu>.

Exams and Evaluations

Grades in this course will be assigned on the basis of three multiple choice examinations. Your final grade for the course will be the weighted average of your scores on these tests.

Exam 1: 42.5% (October 5)
Exam 2: 42.5% (November 9)
Exam 3: 15.0% (November 30)

Exams are not cumulative. There is no separate final exam given during the final exam period.

Please be aware that you must make every effort to arrive on time for scheduled exams. If you arrive late, you may take the exam provided that no exam has yet been turned in. *Once any exam has been completed, no additional examinations will be given out to students without excused absences.* Also, no extra time will be given to students who arrive late.

Letter grades for the course will be assigned on the following scale:

90-100	A	60-69	D
80-89	B	59 ↓	F
70-79	C		

Attendance and Make-Up Exams

As university students, you are responsible for managing your own time and setting your own priorities. I do not take attendance, and attendance at normal lectures has no direct part in the assignment of grades for this course. However, if you choose to miss class for any reason, it is entirely your responsibility to learn any information or concepts covered in the missed class. I strongly advise you to discuss missed lectures with a classmate. I will not provide notes or other materials to individual students to cover missed lectures.

If you miss a scheduled examination, you may only sit for a makeup exam if your absence conforms to the university's policy on excused absences, which may be found here: <http://studentrules.tamu.edu/rule7.htm>

For any absence to be excused, university policy requires a student to:

Notify his or her instructor in writing (acknowledged e-mail message is acceptable) prior to the date of absence if such notification is feasible. In cases where advance notification is not feasible (e.g. unanticipated illness, accident, or emergency) the student must provide notification by the end of the second working day after the absence. This notification should include an explanation of why notice could not be sent prior to the class. [And]...the student must provide additional documentation substantiating the reason for the absence that is satisfactory to the instructor, within one week of the last date of the absence.

Copyright Notice

The content of this course—including, but not limited to syllabi, exams, quizzes, homework and laboratory assignments, and the organization of materials in lectures—is copyrighted. As students enrolled in this course, you have license to keep copies of course materials and to take notes from lecture materials. However, your license does not allow you to make copies of course materials or to share them with any other person without my expressly given permission. Among other things, this means that providing copies of course materials to any sort of “test bank” or selling class notes is a violation of my copyright, which is protected by federal law.

Students with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact Disability Services, currently located in the Disability Services building at the Student Services at White Creek complex on west campus or call 979-845-1637. For additional information, visit <http://disability.tamu.edu>.

Questions and Classroom Conduct

I encourage students to ask questions during class. If you have a question, simply raise your hand to be recognized during the lecture. Also, though it should go without saying, I expect students to behave appropriately in the classroom. At a minimum, this means that you should be attentive during lectures and refrain from sleeping, reading newspapers, working crossword puzzles, playing on Facebook, text messaging, and the like. I also expect students to turn cell phones off or set them to silent during class.

Course Calendar and Weekly Assignments

Please make a point to read the syllabus now and make plans for exams and other class events accordingly. You should expect to spend about 1-2 hours outside of class to prepare for each hour class time.

Week of August 28: The Purposes and Aspirations of American Politics I

Course Syllabus

[The Constitution of the United States](#), Preamble

[The Declaration of Independence](#)

Week of September 4: The Purposes and Aspirations of American Politics II

A Theory of Justice, John Rawls, Chapter I

Anarchy, State, and Utopia, Robert Nozick, Chapter 7

[“The Case for Reparations,”](#) Ta-Nehisi Coates

[“A Time for Choosing,”](#) Ronald Reagan (Video)

[“Two Cities,”](#) Mario Cuomo (Audio)

Week of September 11: Some Fundamentals

The American Political System, Chapter 1

[“The Tragedy of the Commons,”](#) Garret Hardin

Week of September 18: The Constitution I

The American Political System, Chapter 2

The Federalist 10, 51

The Constitution of the United States

Week of September 25: The Constitution II

The American Political System, Chapter 3

[“Objections to the Constitution,”](#) George Mason

[Introduction of the Bill of Rights in Congress,](#) James Madison

Week of October 2: Exam 1

October 3: Review Session

October 5: Exam 1

Week of October 9: Congress

The American Political System, Chapter 5

The Federalist 52, 53, 62-65

Week of October 16: The Courts

The American Political System, Chapters 3, 8

The Federalist 78

[Brutus XV](#)

Week of October 23: The Presidency and the Bureaucracy

The American Political System, Chapters 6, 7
The Federalist 67-70

Week of October 30: Parties and Interest Groups

The American Political System, Chapters 11, 12
The Federalist 10

Week of November 6: Exam 2

November 7: Review Session
November 9: Exam 2

Week of November 13: Public Opinion and Elections

The American Political System, Chapters 9, 10, 13

Week of November 20: Political Economy

The American Political System, Chapter 15
Predicting Presidential Elections and Other Things, Ray C. Fair, Chapters 1,2, 3

November 23: Class does not meet.

Week of November 27: Exam 3

November 28: Review Session
November 30: Exam 3

Week of December 4: Democracy Gone Awry?

"The Myth of the Rational Voter," Bryan Caplan