

AMERICAN POLITICS

University College

U25 101

Spring 2012

Monday 6-8:30PM (Seigle L003)

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Monday: 5-6PM (Seigle 212)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course provides an overview of the politics of American government. The topics covered are the historical development of American politics, federalism, political participation, institutions, and public opinion. That political actors are strategic in their pursuit of objectives is a theme underlying our examination of these topics. Accordingly, we explore the many ways in which strategic political behavior impacts institutions and the interactions between political actors in the United States.

OBJECTIVES

The goal of this course is to introduce you to political science as a discipline while teaching you the fundamentals of government and politics in the United States. The aim of this class is not to teach you *what* to think about politics nor a venue for you to attempt to convince others of your political views. Rather, the goal of this class is to teach you *how* to think about politics. At the end of this course, you should understand the systematic forces—the rules, structures, and procedures—that structure politics as practiced in the United States. Moreover, you should have the tools to assess critically causal claims made by politicians and journalists, to be a conscientious consumer of polls, and to understand how political parties, the media, and interest groups interact with political institutions to affect policy change in the United States.

COURSE MATERIALS

- 1) Samuel Kernell, Gary C. Jacobson, and Thad Kousser. 2012. *The Logic of American Politics*. 5th ed. CQ Press.
- 2) A series of supplementary readings will be distributed to students.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The requirements for this course involve both the completion of reading and writing assignments on your own outside of our class meetings and your active and informed contributions to our course discussions when we meet. While much of our class time will be spent in lecture, we'll hopefully have a good deal of discussion.

Without a doubt, the best way for you to earn a “good” grade in this course is to keep up with the class reading. Because this is an introductory course that aims to introduce you to the fundamental concepts in the field of political science, much of the reading consists of textbook chapters that may be dense. Do your best with the readings before class, and bring any questions that you have with you when you come to class. We'll devote the first portion of every class period to discussion of any

questions about the reading that we might have. If you ever have trouble with a reading, please don't hesitate to e-mail me or visit my office during office hours, and we'll set up a time to discuss it.

QUIZ (20 points). In order to acquaint you with the format of the short answer questions on the exams, we'll have a quiz on the fourth week of class. The quiz will consist of four questions, and you'll choose two of the four questions to answer. A study guide will be distributed in advance of the quiz.

Additionally, I reserve the right to administer "pop" reading quizzes should students' level of preparation demand it. If such quizzes are necessary, the revised grading scale will be discussed in class.

TWO EXAMS (100 points). Students will take a midterm and a final exam. The exams will assess your knowledge of material contained within the assigned readings, from lecture, and from our course discussions. The exams will consist of five short answer questions, chosen from a field of eight potential questions (10 points each) and one essay question (50 points). The format of the exam will be discussed further in class.

The first exam will cover material from the first half of the course, including information that was "fair game" for the quiz. The final exam is not cumulative, though information from the beginning of the semester will certainly be helpful as we discuss information from the latter portion of the class.

PAPER (125 points). Students will write a 6-8 page paper. You'll have the opportunity to select your paper topic from a set of two or three possible topics; the prompts will be designed to integrate material from the entire course. The paper must be submitted before the final exam. No extensions will be given.

PARTICIPATION (55 points). The final portion of your grade is based on your ability and willingness to contribute to our class. What does this require of you? Please prepare for, attend, and participate meaningfully in class weekly. "Meaningful" participation comes in a number of forms: asking questions to clarify course topics, answering questions that I pose in class, drawing connections between course topics and current events, and participating respectfully in class discussions. In other words, good participation is simply being a good member of our class community. Everyone's experience in this course is enhanced by regular attendance and active participation; conversely, everyone's experience suffers if individuals do not participate. Remember that a sincere question often adds as much (if not more) to our understanding of the course material as an explanation of the week's readings. So, don't be afraid to speak up! I will do my best to facilitate your informed participation so you do not have to struggle with this portion of the course.

Please remember that attending class and sitting silently is not, by definition, “participation.” Also, please note that I do not penalize you directly for missing class (though multiple absences will adversely affect your grade through a lower participation score).

EXPECTATIONS/PROCEDURES

RESPECT. In this course, we are all engaged in the endeavor of building a stronger understanding of the American political system. Everyone comes to this course with a different background in our subject and different views of the implications of many of the topics that we discuss. It is important that we all treat each other with the utmost respect.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS. Papers not submitted by the assigned due date and time are late. Late submissions will be accepted; however, they will be subject to a one-half grade (5%) per day (including weekends) late penalty. All assignments must be completed in order to pass this course. The paper for this course is to be submitted (in hard copy) on the date of the final exam. Should an unforeseen event arise and the paper must be e-mailed to the instructor, the document attached to the student’s e-mail will be the one graded.

EXTENSIONS. Extensions will be granted in only the most severe circumstances. If you foresee the need for an extension, one needs to be requested and granted at least 24 hours before the due date. No one is entitled to an extension; they will be offered only at my discretion.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY. I take violations of the University’s academic dishonesty policy very seriously. Please review the policy and let me know if you have any questions.

GRADING SCALE. The course will follow a standard grading scale:

97-100	A+	77-79	C+
93-96	A	73-76	C
90-92	A-	70-72	C-
87-89	B+	67-69	D+
83-86	B	63-66	D
80-82	B-	60-62	D-

DISABILITY. Should you have a disability that requires accommodation, please let me know as soon as possible.

SCHEDULE

Below, you'll find a list of all class meetings, the topic we'll discuss, the reading assignment, and some questions to consider as you prepare for class and as you study for exams. You should complete the reading assignment before you come to class and bring any questions that you have with you to our class meetings. In the event that deviations from this schedule are necessary, they will be announced in class.

January 23 Introduction to the Course

- Reading: None

January 30 The Constitution

- Reading: KJK, Chapters 1 and 2 (Read Ch. 1 closely, skim Ch. 2).
- Questions: What is politics? Why do we have government? What are collective action problems, and why do they matter? What were the framers' most important concerns when drafting the constitution? How does the Constitution differ from the Articles of Confederation? Why is the Constitution "a bundle of compromises?"

February 6 Federalism and Separation of Powers

- Reading: KJK, Chapter 3
Federalist #10 and #51
- Questions: How is political power divided in the United States? How are those divisions of power enforced? How have these divisions of power changed over time?

February 13 Public Opinion

- *Quiz*
- Reading: KJK, Chapter 10
Schuman, Howard. 2002. "Sense and Nonsense about Surveys." *Contexts* Summer 2002, 40-47.
- Questions: How do we know what "the public" thinks? How do we measure public opinion? What makes a poll "good?" What information do we need to be able to interpret a poll reliably?

February 20 The Media

- Reading: KJK, Chapter 14
Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism. 2011. "The Media Primary."
- Questions: What role do journalists play in the American political system? Is the media a "fourth branch" of government? How influential is the media in shaping public opinion and public policy?

February 27 Voting

- Reading: KJK, Chapter 11
Caroline J. Tolbert and David P. Redlask. 2011. "Resolved, Political Parties Should Nominate Candidates for President in a National Primary." in *Debating Reform*
- Questions: Who votes on election day? How do voters decide? What are the consequences of our current presidential nomination process?

March 5 Political Parties and Interest Groups

- Reading: KJK, Chapter 12 (focus on pp. 533-544; 560-583)
KJK, Chapter 13 (focus on pp. 587-590; 594-600; 606-625)
- Review for Exam
- Questions: What differentiates political parties and interest groups? How does each influence policymaking in the United States? What techniques do they use to achieve success? How have these roles changed over time?

March 12 SPRING BREAK

- No class

March 19 Exam #1

March 26 Congress: What Legislators Do

- Reading: KJK, Chapter 6 pp. 239-263
Mayhew, David. 1974. Selection from *Congress: The Electoral Connection*.
- Questions: What is the tension between members' representative and policymaking roles? Why is Congress so inefficient? How do elections shape congressional behavior? What processes/procedures/rules must members follow in order for their bills to become law?

April 2 Congress: How Legislators Do Work

- *Paper Topic Distributed and Discussed*
- Reading: KJK, Chapter 6 pp. 264-301
Packer, George. 2010. "The Empty Chamber." *The New Yorker* August 9.

April 9 Presidency

- Reading: KJK, Chapter 7
- Questions: How has presidential power changed over time? What is the mismatch between public expectations and presidential power? How can presidents achieve success in office?

April 16 Bureaucracy

- Reading: KJK, Chapter 8
 Binder, Sarah A. and Thomas E. Mann. 2010. "Constraints on Leadership in Washington." *Issues in Governance Studies*. No. 41.
- Questions: What do bureaucrats do? What problems are inherent in the use of bureaucrats to implement policies? What is the tension between bureaucracy and democracy?

April 23 Judiciary

- Reading: KJK, Chapter 9
 Selections from Antonin Scalia, *A Matter of Interpretation* and Stephen Breyer, *Active Liberty*
- Questions: How do judges decide cases? How do judges interpret the Constitution? What role does judicial review play in our democratic process?

April 30 Civil Rights and Liberties

- Reading: KJK, Chapter 4 (skim lengthy section on black rights; read rest thoroughly)
 KJK, Chapter 5 (focus on pp. 193-224)
- *Review for final exam*
- Questions: What are civil rights? How are they different from civil liberties? How have levels of civil rights and civil liberties changed over time?

May 7 Final Exam

- *Paper due*