Course Overview and Goals

This course is an introduction to American national government. By the end of the semester, you will know who the main players are in American politics (e.g., voters, House members, President), the decisions and actions that each player can make, and what factors influence what course of action they ultimately take.

Since this year is an election year, we will be going through the textbook in a slightly different order. We will first consider the founding of the national government and fundamental questions about the American democracy, such as civil rights and civil liberties. The second part of the course will cover how the public influences policy, such as through voting in elections. Our discussion on elections will coincide perfectly with the heart of the campaign up to Election Day. Lastly, we will study the national political institutions — i.e., the three branches that make up the federal government.

The type of questions we will focus on are in regards to empirical observations — i.e., explaining things that we observe. For instance, we might ask ourselves, “Why did health care reform pass in 2010 under Obama, but not in 1993 under Clinton?” We will not perform policy analysis (i.e., “Which health care plan would be most effective?”). We will also not pursue “normative” claims in much depth (i.e., questions regarding morality/what we “ought” to do), such as “Is universal health care a worthy goal that we should value?” These questions do of course arise, and we will attend to them on occasion. If you are interested in pursuing such questions more in-depth after this course, the Political Science department has political theory courses that focus on normative questions (e.g., what is justice?) and public policy courses that focus on policy analysis.
In addition to learning the nuts-and-bolts, we will be considering the logic (i.e., basic principles) of politics. This is especially where this course will deviate from the typical high school civics class. We will try to explain why things occur, and to do so, we will approach politics “scientifically” (hence, political science). To do so, we will consider political players (representatives in Congress, voters, interest groups, the President) as goal-oriented individuals, which will be the building block to building theories that will help us understand the underlying logic that drives much of what occurs in American politics.

The basic principles behind the logic of politics are found in many of the other social sciences (economics, psychology, etc) and in fact are often borrowed from those other fields. This similarity between political science and other fields comes about because at the end of the day, politics is about group interactions in social settings. Thinking about politics in these general terms will help us better analyze politics and understand why certain policies are passed, why interest groups do what they do, why voters and politicians have party affiliations, etc. Understanding the logic behind politics will also give you tools to analyze current political events.

**Knowledge:** By the end of the course, you will understand:

- Contemporary debates on the bounds of power of the federal government: U.S. Constitution, federalism and separation of powers, civil rights, civil liberties.
- The formation, over time alteration, and impact of national political institutions: Congress, President, Bureaucracy, Supreme Court
- The role of players outside of the formal walls of the federal government in the political process: Voters, political parties, interest groups, media

**Skills:** This course will also sharpen critical thinking skills:

- Ability to critically discuss current political events and debates, based on theories of politics, rather than solely on opinion.
- Be able to adjudicate between competing theories and claims, based on evidence from observed data and events.

**Required Materials**


Also see nortonebooks.com for e-book options.

**CLICKER.** Used for attendance and quizzes (see below).

**READING CURRENT EVENTS.** You are also expected to read the political news to keep up-to-date on the most notable headline stories. Reading on-line CNN, the New York Times, or the Washington Post will work fine.
Grading

Attendance, participation, and quizzes (15%). Attending lectures can only help your performance on the exams. Simply coming to lectures will cut down the amount of time you will need to spend studying for the exams. Lecture notes will be posted on ANGEL after the lecture (on that day), but of course certain details will be understood better if having attended class.

Despite the large class size, which makes open classroom discussion difficult, we will utilize the i>Clicker to track participation and quizzes. During each lecture (before, during, and/or after), we will pose three multiple choice questions that require an i>Clicker response. These questions will primarily quiz you on the reading assignment for that day or a current political event. They may on occasion simply be a survey question to gauge classroom opinion on a question. Participation/quizzes are graded out of 5 total points: 2 points for simply recording any response that day, and 1 point for each correctly answered question. We will drop your 5 lowest scores. There are no make-ups under any circumstances, even if an “excused absence.” The drops account for all potential absences.

2 in-class exams (25% each). There are two in-class exams on the dates stated in the schedule below. Each exam will only cover material introduced since the previous exam and up to the previous class period. Exams will be composed of multiple choice and open-ended questions. I will discuss exam format and expectations more in-depth when we get closer to the first exam. A study guide will be provided.

Final exam (35%). The final exam will be Thursday, December 11 at 7:45-9:45 a.m. It is cumulative, but it will stress the content covered after Exam 2. Only a narrow set of topics covered by the first two in-class exams, which I will explicitly outline for you, will be fair game for the final exam. Format of the final will be similar to the in-class exams. A study guide will be provided.

Make-up policy: Quizzes and participation: No make-ups. Drops account for absences. Examinations: If a student has a University-approved excuse for missing an examination and if the instructor is notified prior to the examination, arrangements for a make-up examination will be made. Otherwise, the grade for that examination will be a zero.

Extra credit: You can earn up to 8 extra credit points, which are added to one in-class exam score. This can be enough to bump you up if you end up with a borderline grade. Spots toward the end of the semester do fill up, so if you wait too long, there is a high likelihood that you will not have an opportunity to present. Contact me or the TA at least one week prior to the day you would like to present in order to have your presentation approved and put on the schedule. You can choose between two types of presentations. You can only do one of the two options for 5 total extra credit points:

- Politics permeates many aspects of our lives, including popular culture. Pick one song or movie/television clip that brings up politics in some way. You will have to present that a clip of the song or show to the class (if a song, use a video that shows the lyrics) and give a short (~3 minute) discussion of its political relevance. Must be appropriate for class (TA or I must clear it with you first). You cannot use Colbert Report, Daily Show, or something that another student has already presented. Choice is on a first-come-first-served basis.
• It seems like everyday some group of citizens are petitioning the federal government to get involved and solve some problem. Think of an issue that you care about. Give a short (~4 to 5 minute) presentation that outlines the problem, who is asking or lobbying the federal government to take action, where is it in the political process (e.g., did Congress vote on a bill, are interest groups airing television ads?), and what are the prospects for decisive action (i.e., a bill passing Congress and signed into law by the President)? You cannot cover an issue already covered by another student. Choice is on a first-come-first-served basis.

Grading Scale: This scale is a “worst case scenario.” I will apply a curve for an assignment/exam when I deem appropriate.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score Range</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>93-100</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>88-92</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<td>83-87</td>
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<tr>
<td>60-67</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt; 60</td>
<td>0</td>
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How to calculate your grade. Your grade is a weighted average of each “assignment” (weights specified above). First put your quiz scores on a zero to 100 scale (percentage of points earned = points earned, divided by total possible points, times 100). Now all of your grades are on a zero to 100 scale. Multiply each score by its weight, then add it up. For example, if your scores are 80% quiz, 87% exam 1, 85% exam 2, and 92% final, your overall grade is \((80 \times 0.15) + (87 \times 0.25) + (85 \times 0.25) + (92 \times 0.35)\) = 87, which is a 3.0.
Topics and Readings (subject to changes)‡

I. FOUNDATIONS

**Aug 28**  Thurs: Introductions

**Sept 2**  Tues: Five Principles of Politics
Reading: Start Chapter 1

Thurs: Five Principles of Politics
Reading: Finish Chapter 1

**Sept 9**  Tues: The Constitution
Reading: Chapter 2

Thurs: Federalism and Separation of Powers
Reading: Chapter 3

**Sept 16**  Tues: Federalism and Separation of Powers
Reading: Chapter 3

Thurs: Civil Liberties
Reading: Chapter 4

**Sept 23**  Tues: Civil Liberties
Reading: Chapter 4

Thurs: Civil Rights
Reading: Chapter 5

**Sept 30**  Tues: Catch-up/Review

Thurs: **Exam 1** (September 25)

II. DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

**Oct 7**  Tues: Public Opinion
Reading: Chapter 10

Thurs: Introduction to Elections
Reading: Start Chapter 11

‡Reading assignment is to be completed for that class period. I also reserve the right to add additional supplemental readings. Any additional readings, however, will be announced at least a week in advance.
Oct 14  Tues: Parties
Readings: Start Chapter 12

Thurs: Parties in Elections
Readings: Finish Chapter 12

Oct 21  Tues: Interest Groups
Readings: Chapter 13

Thurs: More elections

Oct 28  Tues: Predicting elections

Thurs: Media
Readings: Chapter 14

Nov 4  Tues: Catch-up/Review

Thurs: Exam 2 (Thursday, October 30)

III. National Political Institutions

Nov 11  Tues: Congress
Readings: Start Chapter 6

Thurs: Congress: Effects of Parties and Interest Groups
Reading: Finish Chapter 6, Review old chapters XX

Nov 18  Tues: Presidency
Reading: Start chapter 7

Thurs: Presidency
Reading: Finish Chapter 7

Nov 25  Tues: Bureaucracy
Reading: Chapter 8

Thurs: No class

Dec 2   Tues: Courts
Reading: Chapter 9

Thurs: Recap and Review

Dec 11  Thursday, December 11, 7:45–9:45am. Final exam (same classroom)