

Introduction to American Government
POLI 2051
M / W / F – 12:30 -1:20 PM

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course comprises a broad overview on the subject of “American Politics” and is designed to familiarize you with the fundamentals of American government, elections, campaigns, mass media, and even public opinion. While this course separates these topics on paper, these individual areas of study actually bleed into each other to a significant degree. Throughout this course, you should obviously develop some expertise in these respective areas; however, one of the major goals of this class is to identify how these components of American government fit together.

The semester is structured into three main parts. The first section will be the obligatory review of the early history of the American government, an overview of the constitution and how federalism shapes politics, and a discussion on civil liberties and civil rights. The second section hits the major formal and informal institutions of the American government: Congress, the Presidency, the Judiciary, the “Bureaucracy” (a fancy word for all of the other parts of government that don’t fall into the three main branches), and political parties. Finally, the third section will cover the nuts-and-bolts of elections, campaigns, interest groups, public opinion, and the role that the media plays in covering and shaping all of the above. Obviously this is a lot of material, and we’ll be moving fairly quickly to try and cover the major points of interest.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

I have assigned a fair bit of reading for an intro-level class; however, the trade-off is that there should be very little busy work or filler assignments. It’s vital that you do the assigned reading so that you have something to contribute in class. While this course is designated as a “lecture,” our class size will be small enough to have some degree of discussion—I’m not going to speak “at you” all semester; I expect some back-and-forth discussion during class. Speaking of which: *class attendance is obviously expected.*

1. Exams (60%): You will be presented with 3 exams, which comprise 60 percent of your grade. These exams are scheduled for February 12, March 18, and the third examination will be your Final in the first week of May (date/time, tbd). The exams are *not* cumulative; instead, they will cover the material that we spent reviewing during the weeks preceding the examination.
2. Short essays (20%): In addition to these exams, you will be required to write four one-page essays. These essays will comprise 20 percent of your grade, meaning that they are each worth about 5 percent of your total grade. These assignments are based on the readings and are designed to keep you on-track with the material that will be on the exam. In other words, there’s a high probability that I will draw test materials from these essays. The prompts for these and the dates on which they will be due are provided on page 3 of this syllabus.
3. Participation (20%): There are two forms of class participation in which you will engage this semester. I’ve selected five class periods where you will take an *extremely* simple quiz that consists of two or three questions that anyone who engaged the readings should be able to answer. These quizzes are worth 15 percent of your overall grade, which means that it would behoove you to attend class—there are no makeups for class periods in which you miss and a quiz is assigned. The other 5

percent of your participation grade will be earned through a short, 2-minute presentation of a current-events news stories. I will explain these in greater detail on the next page.

4. Extra credit: You have one opportunity to earn meaningful extra credit this semester, but it's not a handout. Students who wish to write a 5-page, double-spaced essay may earn up to a five percentage point boost on your final grade. Keep in mind that to earn the full five points, your essay will need to be essentially flawless. Nevertheless, even a two or three point boost to your grade—which corresponds to a half-letter-grade change—may help some of you.

GRADING POLICIES

Late work is not accepted. When assignments or presentations are scheduled for a given date, then that is the date on which I will accept your work, with the caveat that “university excused absences” obviously provide for makeup opportunities (keep in mind, however, that documentation must be provided in those cases). It is your responsibility to complete all works assigned in this course in full observation of the Academic Honor Code. Cheating, plagiarism or any form of academic dishonesty are unacceptable. University policies regarding academic honesty will be strictly enforced. If you have any questions about academic dishonesty, please speak either with me or with someone in the *Office of the Dean of Students*.

Please keep in mind that LSU uses a +/- grading system.

>97%	A+
93-97%	A
90-93%	A-
87-90%	B+
83-87%	B
80-83%	B-
77-80%	C+
73-77%	C
70-73%	C-
67-70%	D+
63-67%	D
60-63%	D-
<60%	F

If you have a disability which may require accommodation, you should immediately contact the Office of Services of Students with Disabilities to officially document the needed accommodation. You can find more information at <http://students.lsu.edu/disability>

TEXTBOOKS

Required texts for this class:

The New American Democracy, 7th edition. 2011. Fiorina, Morris, Paul E. Peterson, Bertram Johnson, and William G Mayer. Longman Publishing.

ASSIGNMENT DETAILS

Short Essays

Students are responsible for writing four critical response essays to selected readings over the course of the semester. These should be roughly one-page, single spaced (don't go over one page). Use 1 inch margins; you don't need to write the date / time / extra filler material at the top, although I obviously need you to write *your* name. Please think critically about these essay prompts. I'm interested in what *you* think about the readings. You should obviously integrate what you read and attempt to answer the questions as best as you can.

1. **Essay 1, due 2/22/2015:** Define elite polarization. Why is it important? What are some the underlying causes of this phenomenon in Congress? [Response to Theriault reading, which is available on Moodle]
2. **Essay 2, due 3/14/2015:** Describe Madison's concerns in Federalist No. 10. Why might parties be "dangerous" to democracy? [Response to Federalist No. 10]
3. **Essay 3, due 4/04/2015:** Discuss some of the underlying factors that shape why individuals participate in elections. [Response to the Harder and Krosnik reading, available on Moodle]
4. **Essay 4, due 4/18/2015:** What is public opinion? What are some of its sources? What is ideology? Do people possess beliefs that can be formally described as "ideology?" [Response to Chapter 5 in *The New American Democracy* and the Converse reading, available on Moodle]

Class Presentations

It's important that you learn to speak with confidence in front of your peers. It's equally important that you stay abreast of important news (political) issues that are ongoing in the world around you. Let's kill two birds with one stone and, in the process, give you a chance to grab some easy participation credit. Students are required to sign up one slot for a "2-minute" presentation to be delivered during class periods of your choice throughout the semester. You will pick a news story that you find interesting and distill the content into information that can be easily relayed to your peers. We'll have two quick presentations each day prior to digging into our lecture material. **Please use your Moodle to email the article you've chosen to the class the night before your presentation.**

Requirements: You do not need to make a powerpoint. You do not need props. You do not need handouts. You simply need to choose an article from a reputable news source (think: *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, *The LA Times*, *The Advocate*, etc.), which you will then summarize for your peers. Outline the topic, provide the key points, tell us *why* we should care and what the political implications of the issue are and provide us with a quick conclusion. You have two minutes to make your point. Presenting earns you full points.

Extra Credit Essay (Due 4/27/2015)

You have the opportunity to increase your final grade up to five percentage points by writing a brief essay on policymaking (no longer than 5 pages, double-spaced). First, define and outline the policy-making process (see Chapter 18 in *The New American Democracy*, pg. 528-529). Then, choose among the following policies—gun control, health care reform, or climate change—and make a persuasive argument for one "side" in the policymaking debate. For example, you might explain why legislators should pursue stronger gun control or why private insurance is preferable to government-sponsored healthcare. You'll need to use outside "real" resources to answer these questions, so please cite your references. You'll want to answer questions like: Who does this policy affect? What are the consequences (good or bad) of passing legislation in support of a particular perspective? What barriers might prevent the passage of this legislation?

COURSE SCHEDULE

Part 1. The Foundations of American Government

Week 1 – Overview

- 1/13/2015 First class
1/15/2015 Read Chapter 1 in *The New American Democracy*

Week 2 – Political Culture

- 1/18/2015 MLK Jr. Holiday, **no class**
1/20/2015 Read Chapter 4 in *The New American Democracy*
1/22/2015 Read “Syrian Refugees in America: Separating Fact from Fiction in the Debate”
<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/19/syrian-refugees-in-america-fact-from-fiction-congress>

Week 3 – The Constitution and Federalism

- 1/25/2015 Read Chapter 2 in *The New American Democracy*
1/27/2015 Read Federalist no. 51: <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa51.htm>
1/29/2015 Read Chapter 3 in *The New American Democracy*

Week 4 – Civil liberties and Civil Rights

- 2/1/2015 Read Chapter 16 in *The New American Democracy*
2/3/2015 Read Chapter 17 in *The New American Democracy*
2/5/2015 Read “The Birth of Race-based Slavery”
http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_history_of_american_slavery/2015/05/why_america_adopted_race_based_slavery.single.html
Read “The Case for Reparations”
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

Week 5 – Mardi Gras Break / Exam 1

- 2/8/2015 **no class**
2/10/2015 **no class**
2/12/2015 **EXAM 1**

Part 2. The Institutions of American Government

Week 6 – Congress

- 2/15/2015 Read Chapter 12 in *The New American Democracy*
2/17/2015 Read [Theriault, Chapter 2, available on Moodle]
2/19/2015 Read “Polarized we Govern”
http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/05/27-polarized-we-govern-binder/brookingscepm_polarized_figreplacedtextrevtablerev.pdf

Week 7 – The Presidency

- 2/22/2015 Read Chapter 13 in *The New American Democracy*
ESSAY #1 DUE
2/24/2015 Read “Obama Issues ‘Executive Orders’ by another name”
<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2014/12/16/obama-presidential-memoranda-executive-orders/20191805/>
2/26/2015 Read “Comedian-in-Chief: Presidential Jokes as Crisis Rhetoric” [available on Moodle]

Week 8 – The Judiciary

- 2/29/2015 Read Chapter 15 in *The New American Democracy*
3/2/2015 Read “Bizarre Supreme Court Cases”
<http://listverse.com/2014/10/11/10-strange-supreme-court-cases-with-lasting-impacts/>
3/4/2015 Read “Judicial Selection and Death Penalty Decisions”
<http://www.tomclarkphd.com/publications/CanesWroneClarkKellyAPSR2014.pdf>

Week 9 – The Parties

- 3/7/2015 Read Chapter 8 in *The New American Democracy*
3/9/2015 Read Federalist no. 10: <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa10.htm>
3/11/2015 Read “Activists and Conflict Extension in American Party Politics” [available on Moodle]

Week 10 – The Bureaucracy / Exam 2

- 3/14/2015 Read Chapter 14 in *The New American Democracy*
ESSAY #2 DUE
3/16/2015
3/18/2015 **EXAM 2**

Week 11 – Spring Break

- 3/21/2015 **no class**
3/23/2015 **no class**
3/25/2015 **no class**

Week 12 – Political participation

- 3/28/2015 Read Chapter 6 in *The New American Democracy*
3/30/2015 Read “What if Voting was Compulsory?”
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_best_policy/2004/10/you_must_vote_its_the_law_single.html
Read “Vote – Or Else”
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/10/opinion/10ornstein.html>
4/1/2015 Read “Why Do People Vote? A Psychological Analysis of the Causes of Voter Turnout” [available on Moodle]

Week 13 – Campaigns (and Elections)

- 4/4/2015 Read Chapter 10 in *The New American Democracy*
ESSAY #3 DUE
4/6/2015 Read Chapter 11 in *The New American Democracy*
4/8/2015 **no class**

Week 14 – Public Opinion (finish Campaigns)

- 4/11/2015 Read “Gerrymandering Explainer”
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/03/01/this-is-the-best-explanation-of-gerrymandering-you-will-ever-see/>
Read “The Great Gerrymander of 2012”
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/opinion/sunday/the-great-gerrymander-of-2012.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&
4/13/2015 Read Chapter 5 in *The New American Democracy*
4/15/2015 Read “Abramowitz vs. Fiorina” exchange
<http://www.the-american-interest.com/2013/03/11/polarized-or-sorted-just-whats-wrong-with-our-politics-anyway/>

Week 15 – Interest Groups (finish Public Opinion)

4/18/2015 Read “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics” [available on Moodle]

4/20/2015 Read Chapter 7 in *The New American Democracy*

ESSAY #4 DUE

4/22/2015 Read “The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America” [available on Moodle]

Week 16 – The Media

4/25/2015 Read Chapter 9 in *The New American Democracy*

4/27/2015 Read *News that Matters* excerpt [available on Moodle]

EXTRA CREDIT ESSAY DUE

4/29/2015 Read “Do Women and Men Respond Differently to Negative News?”

<http://www.snsoroka.com/files/MenWomenNegativeNews.pdf>

Final Exam prep