

American Government and Politics

Political Science 220

Winter 2007

(Th: 6:15-9:15pm at Kresge 2435)

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Office Hours: By appointment

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Course Description

The goals of this course are to gain a clear idea of how the American political system - as a democratic government - was created and reformed, to understand how it works, and to evaluate whether it lives up to the standards of a democracy. To achieve these goals, we will explore the theories of democracy and government which provided a basis for the construction of the American political system; examine how the system originated and has been maintained through the interaction between major actors in the political arena; and study the role and function of the major political institutions, both formal (i.e., Congress, the Presidency, the Courts) and informal (e.g., public opinion, the mass media, and interest groups).

In surveying the American political system, we focus on theoretical concepts and frameworks which provide criteria for the evaluation of the system. We will analyze *why* and *how* political actors (both elites and the public) create and change political institutions and rules over the years. Specifically, we want to address the following questions: Why was the Constitution created as it was? How has it changed? How are individuals' rights protected and expanded? How do local, state, and national governments interact under federalism? How does public opinion influence decision making? Are American citizens capable of making reasonable choices in elections and informed opinions on policies? How do interest groups and the mass media mediate citizens' choices and opinions? How do political parties attempt to mobilize and organize citizens to gain political power? How do the President, Congress, and the Supreme Court make policies and interact with each other? And how do international politics affect the American political system?

Teaching format: The class will be a combination of lecture and discussion. I will lecture based on the text book, covering the main points of the chapters and providing illustrations from the readings or current news sources. To encourage discussion, I will regularly ask questions of the class. Students are strongly encouraged to bring their own questions, comments, and ideas to participate in the discussion.

Evaluation: Students can choose one of two options for their evaluation. Grades will be determined as follows.

Option 1

1. Midterm exam (20%)
2. Final exam (35%)
3. Essays (25%)
4. Participation/presentation (20%)

Option 2

1. Midterm exam (30%)
2. Final exam (45%)
3. Participation/presentation (25%)

Exams: There will be two exams - midterm and final. Both exams will include short identification and multiple choice questions. The final will be cumulative, but will be weighted toward the topics covered after the midterm. The questions will be drawn from the text book and the readings.

Essays: Each student who chooses Option 1 above must write three short essays on the questions that are listed below after they read the relevant texts. The length of the essays should be 4-5 pages double spaced with 12 font size and one-inch margins (maximum length is 6 pages). The essays need to address the questions directly with coherent arguments and evidence to support your main thesis. The due dates of the essays are Jan. 25, Feb.15, and March 8. Students should submit a hard copy of the essay to the instructor by the end of the class on the due date. Students are encouraged to use the essay materials for discussions and presentations.

Discussion and Presentation: I believe in the exchange of ideas, discussions, and debates as important tools for learning about American politics. Thus, it is important to engage in constructive debates in the class as well as to make good comments on the subjects and issues. It is necessary to read the text and the other books in advance to prepare and participate in the discussions. Each student (or a group of students) will have at least one chance to present topics that they choose for themselves. The format of the presentations is informal.

Grading standard: Letter grades will be assigned according to the following scoring scheme.

- A range: 90-100%
- B range: 80-89%
- C range: 70-79%
- D range: 60-69%
- F range: below 60%

- A - outstanding work, showing creativity, knowledge of the readings, and engagement with the subject matter.
- B - very good work, demonstrating a command of the material presented and the ability to interact with it and with the class in a knowledgeable way.
- C - good work, exhibiting the completion of the readings and all required assignments.
- D - marginal work, with late assignments, assignments inadequately completed, and little class participation.
- F - poor work, assignments not turned in or consistently turned in late without adequate explanation, lack of participation in class discussions. Note: If an emergency arises during the quarter that makes fulfillment of class requirements difficult, please discuss the situation with me as early as possible, so we can discuss how to resolve the problem and maintain your good standing.

Academic honesty: Students should follow Northwestern University regulations regarding academic integrity which are laid out in the *Student Handbook*. Students are strongly advised to read and familiarize themselves with these regulations. If students violate standards of academic honesty -i.e., by cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, or academic interference, they will get a failing grade for the class and may face expulsion from the University.

Required Texts:

1. Janda, Kenneth, Jeffrey M . Berry, and Jerry Goldman. 2006. *The Challenge of Democracy* 8th edition. New York:Houghton Mifflin.
2. Ellis, Joseph J. 2000. *Founding Brothers*. New York: Vintage Books.
3. Frank, Thomas. 2004. *What's the Matter with Kansas*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
4. Price, David E. 2004. *The Congressional Experience*. 3rd edition. New York: Westview Press ¹

¹These 3 books and the related essay questions are borrowed from professor John Geer, who is Professor in the Department of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. His syllabus is available at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/home/htdocs/psci/geer/docs/psci100f06.pdf>.

COD below refers to *The Challenge of Democracy* and BB to Blackboard.

Reading schedule²

Week 1 (Jan 4): Introduction and organization

I. Foundations of the American Political System

Week 2 (Jan 11): Democracy and the Constitution

Reading assignment: COD chapters 2 (20pp) and 3 (37pp), Articles of Confederation, U.S. Constitution, and Federalist No. 51

Week 3 (Jan 18): Judicial Review, Federalism, Civil liberties

Reading assignment: COD ch. 4 (29pp) and ch. 15 (31pp)

Week 4 (Jan 25): Civil Rights

Reading assignment: COD ch. 16 (30pp)

Ellis' *Founding Brothers* pp 3-205.

Essay question (Due on Jan 25): Were the founding fathers men of character and not driven by personal political ambition?

II. Linking People with Government

Week 5 (Feb 1): Public opinion and the mass media

Reading assignment: COD ch. 5 (32pp) and ch. 6 (27pp)

Week 6 (Feb 8): Mid-term

Week 7 (Feb 15): Parties, Voting, and Campaigning

Reading assignment: COD ch. 7 (31pp), 8 (28pp), and 9 (33pp)

Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas*

Bartel's article, which is available on Blackboard.

Essay question (Due Feb. 15): Are American citizens knowledgeable and competent enough to be able to fulfill their duty as citizens in a democratic society?

²This schedule is subject to change according to the progress of the class.

III. Institutions of Government

Week 8 (Feb 22): Interest groups, The Presidency, and Bureaucracy

Reading assignment: COD ch. 10 (25pp), COD ch. 12 (40pp) and 13 (23pp)

Week 9 (Mar 1): The Courts and Policy-making

Reading assignment: COD ch. 14 (27pp), ch. 17 (20pp) and ch. 20 (37pp)

Week 10 (Mar 8): Congress

Reading assignment: COD ch. 11 (32pp) and Price's entire book.

Price's *The Congressional Experience*

Essay question: Does Congress function as a democratic institution?

Week 11 (Mar 15): Final exam