

Introduction to American Politics

Chapman University
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is intended to provide you with an introduction to American Politics. We will first look at the historical context of the founding of the United States with an emphasis on the constitutional principles which still provide the framework for modern government. Then, we will examine a series of major institutions with an eye to understanding how principles such as checks and balances function in practice. The course will end by examining a handful of contemporary issues that have created a series of constitutional and practical dilemmas.

Ideally, this course will provide guidance for your own observation of and engagement with contemporary American politics. You will be encouraged to apply these principles to topics of your choice, as we attempt to use a broader understanding of American governance and the U.S. Constitution to make sense of what we see playing out before us.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

I encourage participation in lecture, however given and some people's natural tendency to not want to talk in large groups, participation will include coming to the instructor's office hours and email correspondence. Thus, it is really a measure of engagement, rather than how much you talk.

The course grade will consist of participation, a term paper, a midterm, and a final. The midterm and final will both involve a series of short answer questions which will be posted one week before they are due. The paper will be approximately 5 pages and will ask that you apply concepts from the class to a contemporary issue of your choice.

Grade Breakdown: Participation: 20%

Final: 40%

Midterm: 20%

Term Paper: 20%

This course will primarily make use of the Open Stax American Government Textbook (5e) and *The 1619 Project*. The former is a free, open-source textbook and is included on Canvas. There will also be (relatively short) supplemental readings throughout the course, and these are all included on Canvas. Many of these supplemental readings are contemporary analyses of the institutions in question and do not necessarily reflect the instructor's views.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

Historical Foundations and Origins

Week 1, September 1: American Founding

Krutz Chapter 2

Declaration of Independence and Constitution

Federalist Papers 10, 51

Week 2, September 8: Unresolved Questions

Jefferson and Hamilton on the Federal Bank

Virginia and Kentucky Resolution

Webster-Hayne Debates

Week 3, September 15: Slavery and Indigeneity

Chapters 3 and 4 of *The 1619 Project*

Week 4, September 22: Slavery and Indigeneity II

Chapters 5 and 6 of *The 1619 Project*

Major Institutions

Week 5, September 29: Congress

Krutz Chapter 11

GQ: “The Case for Abolishing the Senate”

The Guardian: “The US Senate is undemocratic. That’s bleak for Democrats’ midterm hopes”

September 30: Midterm due

Week 6, October 6: Presidency

Krutz Chapter 12

JFK Center: “Presidents and the Bully Pulpit”

NPR: “Trump Puts A Twist On The Meaning Of 'Bully Pulpit'”

Week 7, October 13: Courts

Krutz Chapter 13

Harvard Kennedy School: “U.S. Supreme Court v. American public opinion: the verdict is in”

Politico: “The Supreme Court is Now Operating Outside of American Public Opinion”

Week 8, October 17: Federalism

Krutz Chapter 3

Dallas Morning News: “Is the Supreme Court moving us backward, or back toward federalism?”

ACLU: “States’ Rights Arguments Aren’t Just for Segregationists”

Week 9, October 24: Civil Liberties

Krutz Chapter 7

Prepare discussion questions on the Bill of Rights

Week 10, October 31: Civil Rights

Krutz Chapter 9

Prepare discussion questions on the the Civil Rights Act and 14th Amendment

Week 11, November 7: Political Parties and Elections

Krutz Chapter 7 and 9

November 11: Term paper due

Week 12, November 14: Interest Groups and Lobbying

Krutz Chapter 10

Week 13: November 24: No Class

Week 14: December 1: Media and Public Opinion

Krutz Chapter 6 and 8

Week 15: December 8: Contemporary Issues

The New Jim Crow, Chapters 1 and 2

IPCC Report on Climate Change, Summary for Policymakers

December 17: Final due

MIDTERM ASSIGNMENT

Please answer one question in each of the following categories, to a total of four questions. Each answer should be approximately one half to one full page.

A. Reading the Constitution

Does it make more sense to read the Constitution in a strict or “elastic” fashion?

By this, I mean how closely should the government hew to the original intent or a strict reading of the Constitution, in line with Jefferson’s approach, or should it

act according to a more expansive doctrine of implied powers, in line with Hamilton's approach.

When answering this question, discuss two of the following concepts or clauses: "necessary and proper", the interstate commerce clause, the ninth amendment, the tenth amendment, judicial review, or the debate over the first national bank.

B. Separation of Powers

1. In Federalist 10, James Madison discusses at length the problem of factions. Please describe the concern, and discuss two ways the Constitution is structured in order to resolve this concern.
2. What is meant by the idea of "separation of powers"? Discuss two ways that the Constitution promotes this concept.
3. Do you think the principle of "separation of powers" is important? What are some advantages or disadvantages of structuring a government according to this principle?

C. Congress and the Presidency

1. There are several ways that the House, Senate, and Presidency "check" each other. Please discuss 2-3 ways this happens and explain the significance of this structure for American governance.
2. Both the Senate and the Electoral College have been criticized as "undemocratic." Why have they faced this accusation, and do you think it's a problem?
3. Congress has legislative power, but the Presidency is increasingly wielding "executive orders" as a semi-policy making tool. Is this a problem or an example of the government evolving with the times?

D. Theoretical Evaluations.

Each of these questions is broadly evaluative and requires your own take. Please try to stay grounded in concepts studied in class, drawing on discussions of factions, states, the Senate, etc.

1. Some argue that the Constitution serves as a tool to enforce propertied/class-privileged minorities. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
2. Our textbook refers to the Constitutions as a symbol of democracy, yet we know that it has clear checks on majority-rule. Given this, does it make sense to say the Constitution is democratic? Is it a problem if it isn't?
3. Slavery and racism were inextricably tied to early American society. How are these problems still intertwined with constitutional principles relied upon today?

TERM PAPER PROMPT

In many ways, the United States' government differs considerably from that envisioned in the Constitution. Many people have argued that this requires changes at the constitutional level, either demanding updates to fit modern society or calling for a restoration of a government according to that envisioned by the founders. Differing solutions build on differing diagnoses that the Constitution is insufficiently democratic, that the government has grown too powerful, or that the fundamental balance of powers has been disrupted, etc.

For this assignment, **please identify an overarching critique** either of the Constitution or of American politics in general. Then, **introduce up to three amendments** to the Constitution in an effort to resolve this critique and explain how they connect, both to each other and to your critique. Suppose that these amendments can be imposed unilaterally, so feasibility is not a question.

Amendments can involve dramatic or slight changes to existing institutions, the creation of additional institutions, the abolition of institutions or branches of government, or instructions on how to read the Constitution or certain articles. Do not hesitate to be creative. I would urge you to avoid simply enumerating a series of rights that you think are important. This is definitely a stop gap measure, unless that is your goal, in which case justify it.

Generally, the paper should take the following form. First, outline a critique you have. Is the Constitution being insufficiently followed? Are basic principles not being practiced sufficiently or rights not being promoted? Is the Constitution outdated or problematic and require major changes? Then, outline each amendment and, throughout the paper, justify how each amendment relates directly as a solution to the critique outlined.

FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Please answer one question in each of the following categories, to a total of three questions. Each answer should be approximately one half to one full page. You may also answer the last optional question. Attempting this question will only potentially increase your grade.

A. Political Parties and Partisanship

1. Many people argue that the U.S. would benefit from a more robust multi-party or third party system. Would this be beneficial or detrimental to the function of existing institutions? Please draw on your understanding of the election system, Courts, Senate, and/or Presidency in answering this question.
2. Please define partisan polarization. Is this a negative phenomenon? Again, draw on your understanding of the election system, Courts, Senate, and/or Presidency in answering this question.

B. Supreme Court and Rights

1. What is judicial review? Is this necessary for the preservation of civil rights and liberties? Or is this detrimental? After defining judicial review, please make specific reference to Supreme Court cases discussed in class, such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Roe v. Wade*, or whichever you think demonstrates your argument.
2. Discuss the 14th Amendment in detail. How has this amendment been used to expand civil rights and liberties during the last 150 years? Does the framework of the 14th Amendment limit the expansion of civil rights and/or liberties?

C. Public Opinion and the Media

1. According to most political socialization research, the politics of our parents heavily influence the politics that we develop later in life. Is this a problem? Does it suggest that people are not thinking for themselves?
2. Scholarship on the contemporary media emphasizes its increasingly fragmented nature, where instead of relying on several major media stations, media consumers choose between a variety of different, often partisan, sources. Is this a problem? Does this contribute to partisanship or does this simply allow us more control over where we get our information?

Z. Optional Bonus Question

1. Based on what you have learned about American politics, would you say you are optimistic for the political future (however you interpret that)? Please explain.