

Introduction to American Government
POLS 103- SPRING 2023
CRN 40132

Dr. Christopher Sprecher
Monday-Wednesday 12:30 p.m.-1:50 p.m.
Office Hours: Wednesday 2:00 p.m.-3:00 p.m.
or by appointment

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General Overview

This is an introductory course in American Government. We will study Congress, the Executive Branch, the Judiciary, the Constitution, civil rights and liberties, interest groups, political parties, and policy (public and foreign).

The main focus of this course will be the institutions of American government. How were rules and norms created to govern (and continue to govern) the American experiment. In doing so, however, we will address who has traditionally had access to these institutions, who has been marginalized from full participation in American democracy, and how this imbalance has been and continues to be addressed and remedied.

The best way to learn this material is to have read the assigned readings **BEFORE** the class date in which it is discussed. This will enable you to be familiar with the new concepts as I discuss them in lecture and for you to ask questions.

I am available for office hours each week, as well as available electronically via email through Canvas or directly through the email listed above.

Teaching Philosophy

Since this is a smaller class, I utilize both lecture and small group activities. My teaching style is a combination of lecture and Socratic exchange. Each class period has a question posed to help guide you in thinking about the topic being discussed that day.

Books

There is one book for the course. It is available for free online on the website below.

[American Government 3e - OpenStax](#)

If you wish to purchase a hard copy, the ISBN numbers are below, and the book will also be in the College bookstore

Hardcover:

ISBN-13: 978-1-711493-96-1

Paperback:

ISBN-13: 978-1-711493-95-4

I will also be making some readings and recordings available outside of the textbook. They will be posted on Canvas and labeled (CV) on the syllabus.

Grading and Course Requirements

In the course there will be 3 exams and 2 short writing assignments. Each exam is worth 100 points, and the writing assignments are worth 100 point each. Thus, there are 500 possible points available for the course. All course materials are graded by me. In the event you are dissatisfied with your grade on any component, you must write up a statement explaining why you think your grade should be changed and submit it to me. I will then review the grade once your statement has been received, along with the ORIGINAL exam or paper. Please realize that I reserve the right, upon regarding your exam or essay, to increase or decrease the grade.

Exam 1	100 points
Exam 2	100 points
Exam 3	100 points
Writing Assignments	200 points

Exams

The exams will cover any material from the previous exam through the day before the exam. They will be short essay exams. Each exam is worth 100 points.

Short Writing Assignments

At two times in the course, I will assign you a short (5 page) writing assignment on a topic relevant to what we have studied. It will be due, typed, a week from the date it is handed out. Each assignment must answer the question asked and provide 5 external citations that are not from the textbook. I will discuss the writing assignments in more detail in the second week of class.

The grading scale for this course is as follows:

90% to 100% =A
80% to 89% = B
70% to 79% = C
60% to 69% = D
0% to 59% = F

*****THERE IS NO GRADING CURVE IN THIS COURSE*****

*****I DO NOT OFFER EXTRA CREDIT IN THIS COURSE*****

Attendance and Missed Assignments

You are expected to attend class regularly and take notes. Although I will not take attendance,

much of the material for the exams is taken from lecture. I will use material for lecture that is not covered in the readings. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to get the lecture notes from a classmate. I will not, **under any circumstances**, give my lecture notes to students.

The handouts used in this course are copyrighted. By "handouts," I mean all materials generated for this class, which include but are not limited to syllabi, quizzes, exams, lab problems, in-class materials, review sheets, and additional problem sets. Because these are copyrighted, you do not have the right to copy the handouts, unless I expressly grant permission.

As a rule, I do not give makeup exams or quizzes, except in the case of extreme sickness or family emergency. If you must miss an exam due to illness or emergency, you must do everything in your power to notify me **before** the exam. I have provided you with an e-mail address that I check regularly. Thus, saying you are unable to contact me is not an excuse.

All makeup examinations must be made up within a week of your return to class, or you will receive a 0 on the missed exam. I also require some form of documentation as to why you missed the exam. I will reiterate illness or family emergencies are the only excuses I will accept. All makeup exams are essay exams.

Incompletes

I will only grant an incomplete if 75% or more of the coursework has been completed, and at the time the student's grade is 2.0 or better. My policy on incompletes is as follows. **Incompletes will only be given in extreme circumstances and must be completed within six weeks of the semester's end, or the portion of the class that is unfinished becomes a 0.0.**

If you feel that you warrant an incomplete, you must contact me **at least** a week prior to the final exam. Once the final exam has been given, I will not grant Incompletes for the course, regardless of the reason.

Expectations

(1) Students are expected to attend class regularly, even when attendance is not an explicit part of the course's grade. If you are not responsible enough to come to class regularly, or if you feel that you have higher priorities in life than attending a lecture for which (or your parents) are paying good money, then do not be surprised if the instructor starts to show you the same amount of respect that you have shown for him or her.

(2) Students are expected to have read the assigned material before coming to class. Each student in class will benefit from having read the material before hearing my lecture, because the lecture will be reinforcing prior knowledge instead of introducing new topics. The entire class also benefits when students are prepared -- the quality of discussion will be higher, students can ask better questions, and the class period will not be burdened by a focus on basic issues that should have been answered by the readings.

(3) Inside the classroom, students are expected to devote their full attention to the course. This means that distractions like newspapers, magazines, beepers, and cellular phones **will not be tolerated**. If you insist on reading the newspaper or being accessible by beeper or cell phone during the class period, please do so at home (or somewhere else outside of the classroom); such activities only serve to disrupt the course and to distract people who really want to be there. This also means that talking with your neighbors or passing notes during class will not be tolerated. If you absolutely must talk about last night's party or your plans for the weekend, please do so outside of the classroom, so that you do not disturb students who actually attend class to learn the material.

I want you to be familiar with significant current political events, and exam questions may assume that knowledge or may directly ask about those events. Each of you may, then, want to pay close attention to newspapers and periodicals that have adequate coverage political events.

Plagiarism

As commonly defined, academic dishonesty/plagiarism consists of passing off as one's own ideas, the words, writings, etc., that belong to another. In accordance with this definition, you are committing plagiarism if you copy the work of another person and turn it in as your own, even if you have the permission of the person. It does not matter from where the material is borrowed — a book, an article, material off the web, another student's paper — all constitute plagiarism unless the source of the work is full identified and credited. It is important when using a phrase, a distinctive idea or concept, or a sentence from another source to credit explicitly that source either in the text, a footnote, or endnote.

Plagiarism is a violation of academic and personal integrity and carries grave consequences. Scholastic dishonesty (including cheating and plagiarism) will not be tolerated. The full consequences of scholastic dishonesty will be pursued consistent with College policy. If you have any questions, please consult the course instructor. Be especially careful with your written assignments to make certain that all sources are explicitly acknowledged in writing. If you plagiarize on the paper for this course, you will fail the course. Period.

Course Objectives

- Comprehend the scope and methods of the field of American Government
- Learn to think analytically and critically about political events, institutions, policies, and issues.
- Understand the political philosophies of the framers of the Constitution and the nature and operation of the United States political institutions and processes under that Constitution as amended and interpreted, and how these compare to other political systems.
- Become knowledgeable about the American political system in comparative perspective.

Student Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to describe the major elements of the three branches of American government; evaluate how individuals participate in, and effect, political actions; and compare the ideas behind diverse types of government policies and their implications.

Americans with Disabilities Act

Any personal learning accommodations that may be needed by a student covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) must be made known to the instructor as soon as possible. This is the student's responsibility. Information about services, academic modifications and documentation requirements can be obtained from the Learning Assistance Program (LAP).

Syllabus Change Policy

Except for changes that substantially effect implantation of the evaluation (grading) statement, this syllabus is a guide for the course and is subject to chance with advance notice.

Course Outline

Monday, January 23 Class Introduction

Wednesday, January 25 What is American Government?

- Readings: Ch. 1, Appendix A
- Bouie, Jamelle. 2021. "Politics", in *The 1619 Project*, created by Nikole Hannah-Jones. (CV)

Question: If the purpose of government is to provide benefits to all strata of society, why do we see inequality?

Monday, January 30 The Constitution

- Readings: Ch. 2, Appendix B
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2021. "Democracy", in *The 1619 Project*, created by Nikole Hannah-Jones. (CV)
- The Preamble
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_NzZvdsbWI
(CV)

Question: Why is a confederal system problematic for a heterogenous society?

Wednesday, February 1 The Constitution

- Readings: Ch. 2, Appendix B
- Constitution of the Iroquois Nation (CV)
<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/iroquois.asp>

Question: Why is a separation of powers viewed as so instrumental in the fledgling United States?

Monday, February 6 Federalism

- Readings: Ch. 3, Appendix C

Question: What do we mean by dual-federalism?

Wednesday, February 8 Federalism

- Readings: Ch. 3, Appendix C
- Obergefell vs. Hodges case (CV)
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/14-556>

Question: Think of one law which is applied differently at the state and federal level. Does it have disproportionate impact on different segments of society?

Monday, February 13 Civil Liberties

- Readings: Ch. 4

Question: Why did some of the founding fathers fear a strong central government?

Wednesday, February 15 Civil Liberties

- Readings: Ch. 4

- Roe vs. Wade case (CV)
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/410/113>
- Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Organization case (CV)
https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf

Question: Are there any specific segments of American society who have disproportionately benefited from the civil liberties outlined in the Bill of Rights?

Monday, February 20 **NO CLASS WASHINGTON DAY**

Wednesday, February 22 **EXAM 1**

Monday, February 27 Civil Rights

- Readings: Ch. 5
- Billie Holiday, Strange Fruit video (CV)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lx_mOECjT_8
- Cohen, Elizabeth. 2019. "Inventing Illegality" (Ch 3), in *Illegal* (CV)

Question: How do civil liberties and civil rights interact?

Wednesday, March 1

Civil Rights

- Readings; Ch.5
- Martin Luther King, Letter from Birmingham Jail (CV)
https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1 HANDED OUT

Question: Why has it been so difficult to get civil rights legislation passed and enforced?

Monday, March 6

Public Opinion and Socialization

- Readings: Ch. 6

Question: What factors are most influential in how Americans define their political identity? What can cause such identities to change?

Wednesday, March 8

Public Opinion and Socialization

- Readings: Ch. 6
- Cesar Chavez Wrath of Grapes Speech (CV)

<https://engl250environarratives.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/chavez-wrath-of-grapes-boycott-speech.pdf>

SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE

Question: Opinion polls are notoriously fickle. How can they be used to advance specific political purposes?

Monday, March 13 Political Parties, and Interest Groups

- Readings: Ch. 9, 10

Question: Who benefits from being an avid supporter of a political party in the United States?

Wednesday, March 15 Political Parties, and Interest Groups

- Readings: Ch. 9, 10
- District of Columbia vs Heller case (CV)
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/07-290.ZS.html>

Question: Why are interest groups so influential when there is no constitutional basis for them? Who benefits? Who is disadvantaged?

Monday, March 20 **NO CLASS SPRING BREAK**

Wednesday, March 22 **NO CLASS SPRING BREAK**

Monday, March 27 Elections and Voting

- Readings: Ch. 7, Appendix D
- Jones, Martha. 2021. "Citizenship", in *The 1619 Project*, created by Nikole Hannah-Jones. (CV)

Question: Who votes? How is the system designed to maximize (or minimize) citizen participation in elections?

Wednesday, March 29 Elections and Voting

- Readings: Ch. 7, Appendix D
- Anderson, Carol. 2019. *One Person, No Vote*. Chapter 1, "A History of Disenfranchisement". (CV).

Question: How does the two-party system that the United States has limit the ability of political reform?

Monday, April 3 The Media
Readings: Ch. 8

Question: Does social media increase or decrease our actual understanding of modern American politics?

Wednesday, April 5 **EXAM 2**

Monday, April 10

Congress

- Readings: Ch. 11
- Anderson, Carol. 2019. *One Person, No Vote*. Chapter 4, “Rigging the Rules”. (CV)

Question: Who gets elected to Congress? Does that have an impact on the legislation they pass?

Wednesday, April 12

Congress

- Readings: Ch. 11
- **I’m just a Bill**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgVKvqTItto> (CV)

SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2 HANDED OUT

Question: Does Congress actually have the ability to constrain the President?

Monday, April 17

The Presidency

- Readings: Ch. 12
- Cohen, Elizabeth. 2019. “Enforcing the Border” (Ch. 4). *Illegal*. (CV)

Question: Why do we refer to “the imperial presidency” so much after 1945? Is that a problem for the separation of powers outlined in the Constitution?

Wednesday, April 19

The Presidency/Bureaucracy

- Readings: Ch. 12, 15

SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE

Question: How does specialization within the executive branch bureaucracy hinder implementation of laws passed by Congress?

Monday, April 24

Courts

- Readings: Ch. 13, Appendix E

Question: Are judicial review and judicial activism related? How do these concepts impact civil liberties and rights?

Wednesday, April 26

Courts

- Readings: Ch. 13, Appendix E

Question: Should Supreme Court justices have term limits? How does lifetime tenure impact the Court?

Monday, May 1

Domestic Policy

- Readings: Ch. 16

Question: How do all three branches of government come together to implement public policy goals in the United States?

Wednesday, May 3

Domestic Policy

- Readings: Ch. 16
- Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke (CV)
[https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/regents_of_the_university_of_california_v_bakke_\(1978\)](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/regents_of_the_university_of_california_v_bakke_(1978))

Question: What happens when the executive branch tries to enact policies that are at odds with state leaders?

Monday, May 8

Foreign Policy

- Readings: Ch. 17
- Bob Dylan, Masters of War (CV)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2mabTnMHe8>

Question: How has the United States balanced its global leadership roles in the era post World War II? Has it been a force for power or for global good.

Wednesday, May 10

Foreign Policy

- Readings: Ch. 17
- Korematsu vs. US discussion (CV)
<https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/facts-and-case-summary-korematsu-v-us>
- Korematsu vs. US case (CV)
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/323/214>

Question: Does security policy or economic policy determine American primacy after 1945?

Monday, May 15

TBA

Wednesday, May 17

Final Thoughts

Monday, May 24

FINAL EXAM 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.