Introduction to American Government

Government 101 Spring 2016

Location Ladd 307
Time 12:20-1:15pm MWF
Final Exam Period May 10 T, 9:00am-12:00pm, Ladd 307

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Overview

This course is designed to introduce students to the academic study of American government. While students certainly are familiar with government through its representations in news media and popular culture, political scientists take a more systematic approach to describing and analyzing government and its functions. In other words, the “What do you know?” question, while important, is inseparable from the “How do you know it?” question. We will read examples over the course of the semester of political science research on various topics. Students will produce a term paper that answers an interesting question in a similar way.

In addition to empirical research, we will also pay close attention to the constitutional underpinnings of American government. How do ideas of limited government, majority rule, minority rights, and individual liberties interact to produce a functioning society within the rule of law? We will examine what goes on in government, politics, and society from both positive (“what is”) and normative (“what should be”) perspectives. These questions are present in all aspects of American government that we will discuss: Foundations, Institutions, Public Participation, and Public Policy.

Textbook and course readings

A textbook is necessary in an introductory class, but it is not sufficient. The required textbook for this class is


I will provide additional readings electronically via the course Blackboard site. Cases and academic articles can be found through the library’s electronic resources. Becoming familiar with the library’s resources will prove invaluable to you over your academic career here, so there is no time like the present to learn how to use them. The Federalist Papers are in the public domain and
widely available on the Internet. Note that course readings are not evenly distributed throughout the course. You may wish to do some of them in advance to space the workload out more evenly.

Course format

Part of the course will be a lecture for the “nuts and bolts” aspects of American government, but I will spend as little time as possible talking at you. I encourage you to ask questions and participate at any time. Classroom discussions will take the readings as their jumping off point, consequently you are responsible for all material covered in lecture as well as in the readings. Some material I will present in lecture will not be in the readings.

Attendance and participation are mandatory to the extent that they factor significantly in your final grade. Note: It is not possible to do well on the latter if you do not do well on the former.

Course requirements and grading

Two midterm exams (20% each), two short papers (15% @ 7.5% each), final paper (15%), final presentation (10%), attendance and participation (15%). Please let me know before class if you must miss. There is no acceptable number of unexcused absences. Regardless of the reason for your absence, you are responsible for the material covered during the class meeting. After three unexcused absences, each subsequent unexcused absence will lower your final letter grade by a half-step (e.g., a B+ becomes a B at four unexcused absences, a B- at five, etc.). We will also do activities that require some out-of-class coordination. They will go toward your attendance and participation grade.

I will employ a standard grade scale: A+ (100-97), A (97-93), A- (93-90), B+ (90-87), B (87-83), B- (83-80), C+ (80-77), C (77-73), C- (73-70), D+ (70-67), D (67-60), F (below 60). I will not round grades as a matter of course; however, your exceptional effort in one or more elements of the final grade may be considered a plus factor if your grade is on the borderline. There is no curve in this course, though I reserve the right to adjust grade cutoffs if necessary. The adjustments will only work neutrally or in your favor, if applied.

Barring clerical error (e.g., I added up the points incorrectly), all grades are final. I am always willing to talk with you about exam grades and suggest ways to improve. But, I will not bargain over grades or points, nor will there be extra credit opportunities.

Exams

We will have two midterm exams, one roughly one-third of the way through the semester and another about two-thirds of the way through the semester. Neither is cumulative. The exams will be part multiple choice and part short answer.

Final paper and presentation

The final paper will be a substantial analytical work (between eight and 10 pages) in which you use data to answer a substantive research question about American government. Citations will follow the American Political Science (APSA) citation guide, a copy of which can be found here: http://www.apsanet.org/portals/54/Files/Publications/APSASStyleManual2006.pdf. Pay particularly close attention to pages 17 through 33.
To make sure that you don’t “sleep” on this assignment, you must meet with me in office hours to propose a topic and research strategy by the end of February. Failure to do so will result in a one full grade level (10%) penalty on the final paper. Once you have had this meeting, you must stick with your proposed topic. Feel free to have meetings both before and after this “official” one to clarify your thoughts and receive guidance on the paper.

The final paper is due in hard copy at the beginning of our final exam period, 9am on May 10. During our final exam period, you will present your research as if you were at an academic conference. Broadly, this means that you will present the main argument of the paper, the data used, the results, and conclusions. You will also field questions from the audience if time allows. To minimize switching time, you will need to e-mail your final presentation to me by 9pm on May 9. Your presentation will last no longer than six minutes. Thus, a central challenge in the presentation is to convey all that needs to be conveyed in a succinct, clear manner.

Expectations and technology policy

I expect this class, the readings, making an argument, and getting involved to be the thing you care about most in the world during the 165 minutes we meet each week. I expect you to come to class at least having read the material for the week, even if you haven’t fully understood it or have an opinion on it yet. That’s why we have class – to work through those issues. But, understanding and evaluation of the materials will be difficult if you have not done the first part: reading them yourself.

I expect you to bring assigned reading material to class with you. Many of the readings are on the course Blackboard site or accessible through the library’s databases. For this reason, if you do not print out the readings, you should bring a laptop with which you can access them. Accessing readings and note-taking are the only regularly authorized uses of an electronic device during class. Please turn off all cell phones, etc. As someone (the internet claims Mahatma Gandhi, but I’m dubious) once said, “If you’re here, be here.”

Disability accommodations

Please inform me during the first two weeks of classes if you need any accommodations in the curriculum, instruction, or assessments of this course to enable you to participate fully. Confidentiality of the shared information will be strictly maintained. We will work with the Coordinator of Student Access Services if accommodations require such assistance.

Academic honesty

I expect everyone to conduct themselves with integrity and honesty in this class. There are two facets to this expectation.

First, all of the work you do in this class will be your own. Don’t cheat. Don’t plagiarize. Don’t take short cuts. If you commit an act of academic dishonesty, you will receive a zero for that assignment. That is the minimum penalty. The Academic Integrity Handbook (available at https://www.skidmore.edu/advising/documents/AcademicIntegrityHandbook_Web.pdf) describes what constitutes academic dishonesty and other possible, greater penalties. Again, don’t cheat.

Second, I expect everyone to be intellectually honest. This means listening attentively to other’s comments and questions and responding appropriately. Some of the material in the class is controversial, and an intellectually vibrant community like Skidmore ought to entertain opinions
on most any side of a controversy. Moreover, a liberally educated person ought to be able to articulate fearlessly the “best case” for any legitimate proposition. So, we will not resort to ad hominem attacks, shut-down-by-slogan, or straw person arguments. (Ok, I might do the straw person argument sometimes, but only for effect.) Believe in the rightness of your argument; be prepared to challenge both yourself and others; and be open to changing your mind.

**Topics and readings**

Please note that the **readings are subject to change**. I will let you know throughout the semester where we are in the schedule and where we are going.

**Foundations**

I. **American Government: Culture and Context** (January 25-27 & February 1-3)
   CGH, Chapters 1-3
   Elazar, “The Three Political Cultures”
   Hamilton, The *Federalist*, No. 15

II. **The Constitution I: Separation of Powers and Federalism** (February 3-10)
   CGH, Chapter 4
   Madison, The *Federalist*, No. 46
   Madison, The *Federalist*, No. 51
   Petersen, *The Price of Federalism*, Chapter 1
   **One of the following cases:**
   *McCulloch v. Maryland*, 17 U.S. 316
   *Wickard v. Filburn*, 317 U.S. 111
   *U.S. v. Lopez*, 514 U.S. 549

III. **The Constitution II: Civil Rights and Civil Liberties** (February 10-17)
    CGH, Chapters 5-6
    **One of the following cases:**
    *Barron v. Baltimore*, 32 U.S. 243
    *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113
    *Katzenbach v. McClung*, 379 U.S. 294

**Institutions**

IV. **Congress: The First Branch** (February 17-26)
    CGH, Chapter 13
    Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection*, Chapter 1
    Fenno, *Home Style*, Chapters 1 & 7
**Midterm 1: In class, February 29**

V.  Presidency: Historical and Contemporary Problems (March 2-11)
CGH, Chapter 14
Hamilton, The *Federalist*, Nos. 67, 70-72
Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, Chapter 3
Neustadt, “The Power to Persuade”
Wildavsky, “The Two Presidencies”
“Capitol Hill Cold Open – Saturday Night Live,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUDSeb2zhHQ0

VI.  The Courts: The Least Dangerous Branch? (March 21-30)
CGH, Chapter 15
Hamilton, The *Federalist*, No. 78
O’Brien, *Storm Center: The Supreme Court in American Politics*, “No Longer the ‘Least Dangerous’ Branch” & Chapter 6

**Short Paper 1 due April 1 – “On the Size of an Institution”**

VII.  Bureaucracy: Policy Implementation in the Modern State (April 1-4)
CGH, Chapter 16
Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do & Why They Do It*

Public Participation

VIII.  Interest Groups and Problems of Collective Action (April 4-8)
CGH, Chapter 12
Madison, The *Federalist*, No. 10
Skocpol, Theda. “Associations without Members”

IX.  Public Opinion: Measurement and Impact (April 8-11)
CGH, Chapter 7

**Midterm 2: In class, April 13**

X.  Campaigns, Elections, and Political Parties (April 15-22)
CGH, Chapters 8-9, 11
Bartels, *Unequal Democracy*, Chapter 3
Aldrich, *Why Parties?*, Chapter 1
Polsby, Chapter 3
XI. Media and Politics (April 22-25)
CGH, Chapter 10

Public Policy

XII. Fiscal, Monetary, Regulatory, Social, and Foreign Policies (April 25-29 & May 2)
CGH, Chapters 17-18

**Short Paper 2 due May 2** – “Policy Analysis Memo”

**Final Exam Period: May 10, 9:00am-12:00pm** (final paper due in hard copy at 9am, presentations turned in by 9pm the night before, presentations [six minutes long] delivered during final exam period)