PSC 141.024 - Introduction to American Government: Theory and Politics

Fall 2017

2:00pm – 3:15pm Tue & Thur

BOYT 104

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Access course materials on D2L: https://d2l.sfasu.edu/d2l/home/198190

Course Description

While “government” is often portrayed as an entity entirely separate from the rest of society, it may be described as a label for the institutions and activities citizens do together. If you are a citizen of the United States, YOU are the government. Citizens empower elected officials to make decisions about how our society is to be structured and operated. Ideally, negotiations result in decisions made to benefit the citizens in the community. In the United States, government and politics are intertwined.

Even if someone tries to actively avoid political entanglements, politics is ubiquitous in the United States. Your school is a public institution; in order to legally operate a motorized vehicle, you must obtain a license from state government; your recreational choices are guided by laws and ordinances which bring you into direct contact with your government (e.g. fishing and hunting licenses). In the fall of every year, there is an election happening somewhere in the country be it for city council, local school board, or President of the United States. Social media, the morning and evening local news broadcasts, and television and print news outlets are replete with information about American politics.

Though you may be working towards a career in science, technology, or the arts, a broad understanding and grasp of the issues and institutions that comprise American government is necessary because despite your vocation, most of you will be an American citizen for your entire lives; before, during, and after your working years. You are already a taxpayer and have every right to investigate, interpret and make demands of our political system and the officials – elected or not – who presently operate it.
This course is a college-level introduction to American and Texas government. Students will begin to develop the body of knowledge necessary for informed civic participation. More specifically, students will learn about democratic principles, the structure and institutions of government, and the role that ethnicity, race, gender, class, culture and the economy play in shaping the political landscape in America.

**General Education Core Curriculum**

This course has been selected to be part of Stephen F. Austin State University’s core curriculum. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board has identified six objectives for all core courses: Critical Thinking Skills, Communication Skills, Empirical and Quantitative Skills, Teamwork, Personal Responsibility, and Social Responsibility. SFA is committed to the improvement of its general education core curriculum by regular assessment of student performance on these six objectives. The following indicates the core objectives addressed by this course:

*Core Curriculum Objectives:*
In any given semester, one or more of the following Core Curriculum Objectives for the political science / government Foundational Component Area may be assessed.

**Critical Thinking Skills**
- creative thinking, innovation, inquiry, and analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of information

**Communication Skills**
- effective development, interpretation and expression of ideas through written, oral, and visual communication

**Social Responsibility**
- intercultural competence, knowledge of civic responsibility, and the ability to effectively engage in regional, national, and global communities

**Personal Responsibility**
- the ability to connect choices, actions, and consequences to ethical decision-making

**Program Learning Outcomes:**
This course is a general education core curriculum course and no specific program learning outcomes for a political science major are addressed in this course.

**Student Learning Outcomes:**
By the end of the course, you should be able:
* To think critically about the relationship between political behavior and political institutions, especially the interdependence of behavior and institutions
* To think critically about American and Texas politics, especially the theoretical foundations of both systems
* To communicate effectively about the foundations of the US and Texas Constitutions and about political matters in general
* To communicate effectively the roles and functions of voters, political parties, interest groups, and media in a democratic political system
* To understand more thoroughly the personal and social rights and responsibilities associated with American citizenship
Required Reading
This course requires two textbooks\(^1\), and selected readings. The books are available in several formats from the SFASU bookstore as well as directly from the publisher and other online outlets.


Other readings are available online *as indicated on the electronic version of this syllabus.* **Students are responsible for making themselves aware of these readings, obtaining them, and reading them prior to the class in which they are discussed.**

While it is always good to pay attention to current events, it will be even more beneficial to you to do so during the course of the semester. We will be discussing political events throughout the semester and staying abreast of current events will give you the fuel to contribute to classroom and online discussions which will result in more participation points for you.

Course Requirements and Grading
Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirement</th>
<th>Percentage of Overall Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First exam</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<td>Second exam:</td>
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<td>Third exam:</td>
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<td>Final exam:</td>
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<td>Short reading responses:</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>Informed participation:</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>Local government paper:</td>
<td>20%</td>
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Exams (60% of overall grade; 15% each; total 300 points)

Exam #1 will be held during the fifth week of the semester. It will cover all the material from lectures, class discussions, and reading up to the day of the exam.

Exam #2 will be held during the ninth week of the semester. It will cover all the material from lectures, class discussions, and reading *since* the first exam.

Exam #3 will be held during the eleventh week of the semester. It will cover all the material from lectures, class discussions, and reading *since* the second exam.

The final exam will be held on **Tuesday, December 12th, 2017.** The exam will cover all the material from lectures, class discussions, and reading *since* the third exam.

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\(^1\) In the *Course Schedule and Reading Assignments*, the textbooks are referred to as “Ginsburg, et al” and “Baily”
**Remember:** in addition to textbook material, there are individual articles from various news outlets included on D2L that are part of the required reading and thus their content will be included on exams.

Short Reading Responses (10% of overall grade; total 50 points)

Writing regularly will improve your writing skills and benefit you beyond your formal academic career. As such, you will be expected to write a short response to each reading assignment. These responses should be one or (at the most) two paragraphs and are designed for you to intellectually engage with the reading material. These are not necessarily summaries of the content of the entire chapter(s), but your reaction to one or more aspects of the material. For example, you may find an example or vignette in the text particularly interesting or relevant to your own experience. You could write a paragraph or two on that particular topic and discuss how it speaks to you directly. The same may be the case with a particular chart, graph, or figure and you could discuss that in your response.

I will collect these responses from each student at random intervals throughout the semester at the beginning of the class session. **If you are absent on the day that the responses are collected, you will NOT have the opportunity to make up the missed assignment. This assignment is designed to encourage regular attendance and is in lieu of regular quizzes.**

The reading responses must be typed, single-spaced, 12-point font. Please include your FULL name, the date of the assignment, and the article or chapter (author and number) of the reading that your response is for. A standard paragraph should be no less than four sentences. These will be graded on a “+” or “-” scale with “+” meaning full credit and “-” meaning half-credit. Full credit will be given to those students who use proper grammar and punctuation and express critical and/or insightful thinking skills in their writing.

Informed Participation / Attendance (10% of overall grade; total 50 points)

Each student is expected to attend all lectures and participate regularly. No grading penalty will be levied against those students who miss three (3) or fewer class sessions. For each absence beyond three (3), your participation grade will be reduced by 5 points. Attendance and participation points aside, it is simply not possible to do well in the course without attending lecture.

Classroom participation is HIGHLY encouraged. Those who participate regularly will not only maximize their points in this area, but they tend to get more out of the course. Students vary in how they interact with materials in class. There are two main ways participation points may be earned: contributing to classroom discussion and/or participating in online discussions in D2L.

Another consideration regarding attending lectures is that the reading responses will be collected at random and if you miss a lecture during which those assignments are collected, you will miss out on the points for that assignment. If you are going to miss a class session, please send your instructor an email letting him know ahead of time, if possible, or as soon as possible afterward.
Local Government Paper (20% of overall grade; total 100 points)

Local governments include school boards, city councils, and county commissions (among others). These are the units of government in closest proximity to you as a citizen and oftentimes provide the best opportunity for being an active citizen and making changes in society. People who sit on these boards are all members of the wider community; they are your friends, neighbors, and local civic leaders.

You will go to a local government meeting or watch one online. You will take notes on worksheets. Your grade will depend on the detail in your notes and an essay evaluating the meeting in a way that incorporates themes and concepts from the course with your observations. Additional information on this assignment will be provided in class and on D2L.

Grading Scale:

Total points available: 500

- 500 to 450 “A”
- 449 to 400 “B”
- 399 to 350 “C”
- 349 to 300 “D”
- Below 300 “F”

Class Policies

Course webpage

We will make use of the course webpage for posting selected readings, submitting assignments, disseminating the syllabus, making announcements, and participating in online discussion boards.

Technology policy

**LIDS DOWN!** Using laptops during class is prohibited unless you have a documented accessibility accommodation (if you don't know what this is, you probably don't have one. See me for further explanation.). The same goes for cell phones, tablets, and any other personal technology. Failure to adhere to this policy will result in points deducted from your participation grade. Please set cell phones to silent BEFORE class.

Contacting your instructor

Your instructor is readily available to answer questions during office hours. Email is best for clarification purposes. [Please do not contact the instructor via the course webpage as I will not be checking that email account regularly] All written communication, including emails, should be properly addressed and written. Your emails should a.) identify the course in the

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2 [https://d2l.sfasu.edu/d2l/home/198190](https://d2l.sfasu.edu/d2l/home/198190)
3 Here’s a GREAT primer on interacting with your professors both now and in the future! [https://medium.com/@lportwoodstacer/how-to-email-your-professor-without-being-annoying-af-cf64ae0e4087](https://medium.com/@lportwoodstacer/how-to-email-your-professor-without-being-annoying-af-cf64ae0e4087)
email's subject heading, b.) respectfully address your instructor, c.) use appropriate grammar and punctuation, and d.) include your first AND last name.

Tardiness, leaving class early, and appropriate behavior

This course is designed to reward students who attend class, put forth a high level of effort, and accept responsibility for their education. Attendance will be taken daily. The class times have been established by the university and are non-negotiable. Your instructor believes strongly in respecting your time and will do so by starting and ending class on time. Please reciprocate by arriving on time and remaining in class until the instructor ends the class session.

A few words on class discussion: Your instructor is an advocate for public debate and conversation; deep-democracy requires citizens to discuss issues of the day regularly and share opinions and insights. As this is a political science course, it stands to reason that we will be discussing topics which can be, and often are, controversial. Opinions abound regarding differing public policies, elected officials, and ideologies. All opinions are welcomed and encouraged in our class discussion with one basic rule: mutual respect among participants. Some strongly held opinions may not be popular, but in discussing them, we all have an opportunity to learn and grow. As such, your instructor will not be stifling debate on any particular topic broached in class. However, in the spirit of mutual respect, it is expected that you refrain from offensive or derogatory language directed at any one individual or group of individuals. Free speech, as protected by our constitution, is a right that we all enjoy, but along with it comes the responsibility we have to each treat each other with respect.

Makeup exams

There will be no makeup exams, except in case of verifiable emergency as specified below or where university policy applies. If you miss an exam, you will receive a zero (0). If you are late to an exam, you must take the exam in time remaining. If you arrive after the first student has completed his/her exam, you will receive a zero (0). If you are eligible to take a makeup exam, the format will be entirely essay.

Grading policies and standards

Graded exams, reading responses, and assignments will be returned as promptly as possible. If you have questions about your grade(s), you should come and talk with your instructor during office hours. If you believe you received a grade that is inaccurate and wish to contest it, the instructor reserves the right to re-grade the entire work. In essence, this means that the grade will be completely re-evaluated and may go up or down as the instructor sees fit.

Academic dishonesty

Any student engaging in academic dishonesty will face severe sanctions, including receiving an F in the course and being reported to school administrators for further disciplinary action. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic dishonesty, you should ask the instructor prior to turning in any assignment.

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4 (see: http://www.sfasu.edu/policies/4.1-student-academic-dishonesty.pdf)
Note: It is a good idea to read the syllabus in its entirety for each of your classes. The syllabus is the contract for services between the student and the instructor. Send me an email indicating what page this message is on before our class session on Tuesday, 9/5/17 and you will receive five participation points. Please don’t reveal this opportunity to your fellow students. Let’s hope they find it on their own!

Personal problems and emergencies

There are at least three categories of problems and emergencies that could arise:

Problems the Due Date of an Assignment: If a problem arises the day an assignment is due, the student is still required to submit the assignment on time. All late work on assignments will be penalized at the rate of 5 points per day, including weekends. Note that all late work for assignments will face such a deduction, regardless of whether the lateness was due to illness, poor weather, computer problems, traffic violations, etc.

Note: in the case of ongoing illness or issue (i.e. “General Problems”), arrangements can be made to restructure the due dates of assignments.

Problems the Day of an Exam: If a problem or emergency arises that will prevent you from attending an exam, you should contact me as soon as possible. If you are ill, I expect to be contacted via email by the time of the exam. If you have another extenuating circumstance arise, you must contact me as soon as possible, no later than 24 hours after the exam. For the latter, I may require documentation depending on the issue. Contacts can be either by email (preferred) or in person, or by phone.

Note: the format for a makeup exam under any circumstance will be entirely essay.

General Problems: If a problem arises that impedes your ability to perform well in the course, you must communicate with me in some fashion at the onset of the crisis. I understand that family situations, personal problems, or other circumstances can and do arise, and arrangements can be made to deal with these issues that avoid the late penalties described above, and may allow for concessions regarding the scheduling of exams. Some of these issues, such as problems arising related to a death in the family, will require documentation, while others can be simply addressed in person during office hours, or if necessary, over the phone or by email. In all situations where general problems arise, I will make arrangements with you regarding how to deal with the situation provided you alert me to the problem early.

Note: the later you wait to alert me to the problem, the more limited accommodation options may be.

Course Schedule and Reading Assignments

Please note that the schedule below is a guideline. Actual material covered in class may deviate from the schedule according to the progress of the class and discussion. Unless otherwise

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5 Reading responses are not subject to this policy. If you are absent on a day when these are collected, you cannot make them up / submit them late.
indicated orally during class, we will follow the order of the topics as listed in the schedule. It is the responsibility of the student to be aware of where we are in the progress of the course and where we deviate from this schedule.

**Week 1**

Tue, 8/29  Introduction to the course / Syllabus review / How to do well in this course

Thu, 8/31  American Political Culture

Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.1

**Week 2**

Tue, 9/5  American political culture (cont’d)

Reading: [How ‘Millennials’ ruined democracy](#)

Thu, 9/7  American exceptionalism

Reading 1: [In defense of American exceptionalism](#)

Reading 2: [American exceptionalism little but a myth](#)

**Week 3**

Tue, 9/12  The Founding & the U.S. Constitution

Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.2

Thu, 9/14  The Founding & the U.S. Constitution (cont’d)

Reading: Declaration of Independence (Ginsburg, et al., appendix)

Reading: [Reclaiming our Declaration of Independence](#)

**Week 4**

Tue, 9/19  Federalism

Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.3

Thu, 9/21  Civil Liberties

Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.4

**Week 5**

Tue, 9/26  Church & State

Reading 1: [Gay marriage and religious freedom cannot coexist](#)

Reading 2: [Not about gay rights: Same sex marriage and the separation . . .](#)

Thu, 9/28  Eminent Domain

Reading 1: [The story behind Kelo v. New London](#)
Reading 2: [Kelo v. City of New London ten years later](#)

**Week 6**

Tue, 10/3  **EXAM #1**

Thu, 10/5  Civil Rights

Reading: Ginsburg, et al., chapter 5

**Week 7**

Tue, 10/10  Public opinion

Reading: Ginsburg, et al., chapter 6

Thu, 10/12  The Media

Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.7

**Week 8**

Tue, 10/17  Media bias

Reading 1: [If its Sunday, it’s a conservative](#)

Reading 2: [How to detect bias in news media](#)

Thu, 10/19  Political Participation & Voting

Reading 1: Ginsburg, et al., ch.8

Reading 2: [Why Vote?](#)

Reading 3: [Why I left the Republican Party to become a Democrat](#)

**Week 9**

Tue, 10/24  **EXAM #2**

Thu, 10/26  Political parties

Reading 1: Ginsburg, et al., ch.9

Reading 2: [Faced with Trump and Clinton, Americans yearn for third choice](#)

Exercise 1: [isidewith](#) (complete the quiz and come prepared to discuss)

**Week 10**

Tue, 10/31  Groups / Interests

Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.11

Thu, 11/2  Groups / Interests (cont'd)
Reading 1: *When interest groups go too far*
Reading 2: *Lobbying, special interests and “buying” influence*

**Week 11**

Tue, 11/7  Campaigns / Elections  
Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.10

Thu, 11/9  **EXAM #3**

**Week 12**

Tue, 11/14  Texas Political Culture  
Reading: Baily, ch. 1

Thu, 11/16  Texas Constitution  
Reading: Baily, ch. 2

*** LOCAL GOVERNMENT PAPER DUE ***
*** Nov 20 - 24 ***
*** THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY - NO CLASSES ***

**Week 13**

Tue, 11/28  Civil Rights and Civil Liberties in Texas  
Reading: Baily, ch. 3

Thu, 11/30  Elections, Voting, and Political Participation in Texas  
Reading: Baily, ch.4

**Week 14**

Tue, 12/5  Public Opinion in Texas  
Reading: Baily, ch. 5

Thu, 12/7  Political Parties in Texas  
Reading: Baily, ch. 6

**FINAL EXAM**

Tue, 12/14 1:00pm - 3:00pm