Department of Government

PSC 142.009 - Introduction to American Government: Structure and Functions
Fall 2017
1:00pm – 1:50pm Mon, Wed, Fri
Ferguson 371
Instructor: Robert W. Velez, Ph.D.
E-mail: velezrw@sfasu.edu
Telephone: (936) 468-1309
Office: Vera Dugas LAN room 129

Access course materials: https://d2l.sfasu.edu/d2l/home/196048

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. As a complement to PSC 141, the course focuses on government institutions and policy formulation,
implementation, and implication. It discusses legislative, executive, and judicial functions in both federal and Texas governments (county and municipal). In areas of public policy both domestic and foreign policies are examined.

**General Education 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.

**Required Reading**
This course requires two textbooks, 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 in class 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.

---

1 In the *Course Schedule and Reading Assignments*, the textbooks are referred to as “Ginsburg, et al” and “Baily”

2 [https://d2l.sfasu.edu/d2l/home/196048](https://d2l.sfasu.edu/d2l/home/196048)
Course Requirements and Grading

Overview

First exam: 15% of overall grade
Second exam: 15% of overall grade
Third exam: 15% of overall grade
Final exam: 15% of overall grade
Short reading responses: 10% of overall grade
Informed participation: 10% of overall grade
Local government paper: 20% of overall grade

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 **Monday, December 11th, 2017 1:00p - 3:00p**. The exam will cover all the material from lectures, class discussions, and reading since the third exam.

**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. Of course, as adults, there will be times and situations that we have little control over and missing a class session may be unavoidable. As such, 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. You are PAYING MONEY for this course; get your money's worth!

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 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.

---

3 TBD
4 Here is an EXCELLENT primer for communicating with me (and ALL your professors now and in the future): https://medium.com/@lportwoodstacer/how-to-email-your-professor-without-being-annoying-af-cf64ae0e4087
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.

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 Wednesday, 8/30/17 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

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.
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), 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 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**

Mon, 8/28  Introduction to the course / Syllabus review / How to do well in this course

Wed, 8/30mmasional (dis)Approval

Reading: *Everybody hates Congress. So why do congressmen get re-elected?*

Fri, 9/1 Congress (cont’d)

Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.12

**Week 2**

Mon, 9/4 Texas Legislature

Reading: Baily, ch.1

Wed, 9/6 Texas Legislature (cont’d)
Fri, 9/8  Texas Legislature (cont’d)
Reading 1: Court says Texas congressional districts gerrymandered to hurt minorities
Reading 2: Supreme Court to take up partisan gerrymandering case . . .

**Week 3**
Mon, 9/11  Presidency
Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.13
Wed, 9/13  Presidency (cont’d)
Fri, 9/15  Presidency (cont’d)
Reading: Humility and the Presidency

**Week 4**
Mon, 9/18  Texas Governor
Reading: Baily, ch.2
Wed, 9/20  Texas Governor (cont’d)
Fri, 9/22  Texas Governor (cont’d)
Reading 1: Governor Struggles to Lead as Texas Republicans Splinter
Reading 2: Wendy Davis lost badly. Here’s how it happened.

**Week 5**
Mon, 9/25  EXAM #1
Wed, 9/27  Church & State
Reading 1: Gay marriage and religious freedom cannot coexist
Reading 2: Not about gay rights: Same sex marriage and the separation . . .
Fri, 29  Eminent Domain
Reading 1: The story behind Kelo v. New London
Reading 2: Kelo v. City of New London ten years later

**Week 6**
Mon, 10/2  Judiciary
Reading: Ginsburg, et al., ch.15
Wed, 10/4  Judiciary (cont’d)
Fri, 10/6  Judicial Activism
Reading 1: How activist is the Supreme Court?
Reading 2: Those “Activist” Judges

**Week 7**
Mon, 10/9  Texas Judiciary
Reading: Baily, ch. 4
Wed, 10/11  Texas Judiciary (cont’d)
Fri, 10/13  Local Government in Texas
Reading: Baily, ch. 5

**Week 8**
Mon, 10/16  Local Government in Texas (cont’d)
Wed, 10/18  **EXAM #2**
Fri, 10/20  FILM: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington

**Week 9**
Mon, 10/23  FILM / DISCUSSION: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington
Wed, 10/25  Federal Bureaucracy
Reading 1: Ginsburg, et al., ch.14
Fri, 10/27  Federal Bureaucracy (cont’d)

**Week 10**
Mon, 10/30  Should Government be Run Like a Business?
Reading: Appleby (1945) “Government is Different”
Wed, 11/1  The Federal Budget
Reading: Federal Spending: Where Does the Money Go?
Fri, 11/3  The Federal Budget (cont’d)
DUE: PUBLIC POLICY WRITING ASSIGNMENT - LiveText

**Week 11**
Mon 11/6  Texas Bureaucracy
Reading: Baily, ch. 3
Wed, 11/8  Texas Bureaucracy (cont’d)
Fri, 11/10  Texas Bureaucracy (cont’d)

**Week 12**

Mon, 11/13  Texas Public Policy
   Reading: Baily, ch. 6

Wed, 11/15  Texas Public Policy (cont’d)
   *** LOCAL GOVERNMENT PAPER DUE ***

Fri, 11/17  EXAM #3
   *** THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY - NO CLASSES ***

**Week 13**

Mon, 11/27  Public Policy Process in Texas
   Reading: Baily, ch. 7

Wed, 11/29  Public Policy Process in Texas (cont’d)

Fri, 12/1  Public Policy: Sports Stadiums
   Reading 1: [Why should public money be used to build sports stadiums?](#)
   Reading 2: [What abandoned Olympic venues look like today](#)

**Week 14**

Mon, 12/4  Public Policy: Drug Policy
   Reading 1: [How not to make a hash out of cannabis legalization](#)
   Reading 2: [Could pot help solve the U.S. opioid epidemic?](#)

Wed, 12/6  Public Policy: Public assistance and social services
   Reading 1: [How Welfare Reform Changed American Poverty](#)
   Reading 2: [20 Years Since Welfare Reform](#)

Fri, 12/8  Public Policy: Universal Basic Income
   Reading 1: [Why Finland’s Basic Income Experiment Isn’t Working](#)
   Reading 2: [Million Dollar Murray](#)

**FINAL EXAM: 12/11/17 1:00p - 3:00p**
Course Syllabus Appendix

The following information is required by the Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost for inclusion in the syllabus for this course:

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.

Assessment of these objectives at SFA will be based on student work from all core curriculum courses. This student work will be collected in D2L through LiveText, the assessment management system selected by SFA to collect student work for core assessment. LiveText accounts will be provided to all students enrolled in core courses through the university technology fee. You will be required to register your LiveText account, and you will be notified how to register your account through your SFA e-mail account. If you forward your SFA e-mail to another account and do not receive an e-mail concerning LiveText registration, please be sure to check your junk mail folder and your spam filter for these e-mails. If you have questions about LiveText call Ext. 1267 or e-mail SFALiveText@sfasu.edu.

The chart below indicates the core objectives addressed by this course, the assignment(s) that will be used to assess the objectives in this course and uploaded to LiveText this semester, and the date the assignment(s) should be uploaded to LiveText. Not every assignment will be collected for assessment every semester. Your instructor will notify you which assignment(s) must be submitted for assessment in LiveText this semester.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Objective</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Course Assignment Title</th>
<th>Date Due in LiveText</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking Skills</td>
<td>To include creative thinking, innovation, inquiry, and analysis, evaluation and synthesis of information.</td>
<td>PUBLIC POLICY WRITING ASSIGNMENT</td>
<td>11/3/2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>To include effective development, interpretation and expression of ideas though written, oral, and visual communication.</td>
<td>Assessed in PSC 142, but not assessed this semester.</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empirical and Quantitative Skills</td>
<td>To include the manipulation and analysis of numerical data or observable facts resulting in</td>
<td>Not assessed in PSC 142.</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Not assessed in PSC 142.</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>To include the ability to consider different points of view and to work effectively with others to support a shared purpose or goal.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Responsibility</td>
<td>To include the ability to connect choices, actions and consequences to ethical decision-making.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Responsibility</td>
<td>To include intercultural competence, knowledge of civic responsibility, and the ability to engage effectively in regional, national, and global communities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>