

Louisiana State University

Political Science 2051, Section 3: *Introduction to American Government*

Spring 2016; Wednesday 6:00 PM – 8:50 PM; 111 Coates Hall

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Office Hours: Wed, 12:00-3:00; and by appointment

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Course Description: As an overview of American government, this course explores how the American system of government came to be; the forces that shaped its development, and their their continuing influence; its constitution, institutions, and processes. This course is an **approved general education credit** for the social sciences. According to the LSU catalogue, "General education courses are not hurdles to be overcome; rather, they are means by which students learn to think, describe, interpret, and analyze the world. Their primary aim is to educate rather than train, and to instill a desire for life-long learning." In the social sciences, the learning outcome sought is "an understanding of the informing factors of global interdependence, including economic forces, political dynamics, and cultural and linguistic difference."

Course Objectives: The primary learning objective of this course is to help citizens understand and perform their roles in a democratic society by imparting a basic knowledge and understanding of what the American political system is, how and why it works, and how it may be changed when it is seen to fail. This basic objective may be divided into more specific learning objectives:

1. To foster a dynamic and safe environment for intellectual curiosity, civil discussion, and growth as a class, as a democratic people, and as free individuals;
2. To critically examine the bases for our pursuit of political knowledge through serious consideration of the philosophic and historical origins that have shaped the creation and evolution of the American government and its constitution;
3. To increase our knowledge of our basic rights as citizens in this country;
4. To inform our awareness of the basic duties inhering our role as citizens in a democracy;
5. To critically and imaginatively explore the ways in which our governments influence our quality of life as citizens, and how we may influence our governments for change.

Required Text:

Cal Jillson, *American Government: Political Development and Institutional Change* [Eighth Edition]

- Additional reading selections will be posted to Moodle and made available to students.
- Students are strongly encouraged to take advantage of the various newspapers provided on campus (for which they are paying, whether they realize it or not). Relevant news items will frequently inform our class discussions, and bringing these to the attention of the class will enhance our discussions (and potentially earn participation credit).

Instructional Activities & Course Requirements: Classes will primarily consist of lecture, though some discussion may be encouraged. Good note taking is absolutely essential, as exam questions will come from both the text and lecture notes. **I do not provide Powerpoint, or review sheets before the exams.** Students are responsible for course notes.

Exams: There will be **four** major exams. The first three exams will be administered in the [testing center](#), and students are responsible for scheduling their own exams. The COMPREHENSIVE final exam will be administered in-class (Scantron cards are required) at the time designated on the LSU academic calendar (Wednesday, May 4, 8:00-10:00 PM). Absences and exemptions from exams can only be made with prior notification and approval, and will be considered on a case-by-case basis. All make-up exams will be in essay format (bluebook required) and will be given at one time during the week of final exams.

Participation:

Students are expected to adhere to the University Code of Conduct, which can be located at <http://saa.lsu.edu/code-student-conduct>. Violators will be referred immediately to the Dean of Students. During exams, **all** electronic devices must be turned off and put away.

A NOTE ON ELECTRONIC DEVICES: while the use of laptops for note taking is not currently forbidden in this course, it is *strongly discouraged*. I reserve the right to change this policy if I perceive that the presence of laptops is causing a general disturbance in the classroom. Screens tend to cause distractions, not only for those immediately in front of them, but also for everyone else seated in range of view. Phone use in class is *expressly forbidden*, and repeated infractions of this rule may result in loss of participation points or expulsion from class. Students are expected to be prepared and attentive during each class meeting, and respectful of their classmates and instructor.

Grading:

Four major exams during the semester, 100 pts each, taken as a percentage of score after any curves are added. Each counts as 20% of your total grade for the course. = 400 possible points

<u>Grading Scale:</u>	
97%-100%=A+	83%-86.9%=B
93%-96.9%=A	80%-82.9%=B-
90%-92.9%=A-	...etc.
87%-89.9%=B+	<60%=F

Class Participation: Weekly quizzes, writing assignments, and graded class discussion: 20% .10 points available per week. (x 16 weeks) = 160 possible points.

Attendance: Because our class meets only once per week, attendance is essential for success. I do not enforce any attendance policy so I rely heavily on the class participation portion of the grade. Because I do not allow makeups for missed in-class participation, I offset for absences by dropping your **lowest two** participation scores. I will also allow offer one extra credit writing assignment at the end of the semester, worth up to twenty points.

Additional readings will be assigned frequently. Students are expected to have read and reflected upon these in advance and come to class prepared to discuss them.

Tentative Course Outline:

I. WEEK 1 Introduction (Jillson chap. 1, the [Mayflower Compact](#) and the [Declaration of Independence](#))

- A. Goals for the course. Why study American government?
- B. What is government? Some basic definitions.
- C. What is government for? How much should government do?

"We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs, not as harmless, but a useless character."
—Thucydides

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary." —Madison

"... the main concern of politics is to engender a certain character in the citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions." —Aristotle

"It is the duty of the government to make it easy for the people to do right, and difficult for the people to do wrong."—
Gladstone

II. WEEKS 2,3: The Formal Institutional Setting (Chaps. 2 & 3)

- A. Articles of Confederation (read in Appendix);
- B. The Constitution (read in Appendix);
 - 1. The Founding Fathers and the Constitutional Convention of 1787;
 - 2. Plans, proposals and compromises;
 - 3. Ratification and *The Federalist Papers* (see Appendix; read #'s 10 & 51) ;
 - 4. Interpretations: Beard and McDonald
 - 5. Fundamental Principles and Features and their origins;
 - a. Separation of powers and checks and balances
 - b. Federalism and the types of powers
 - c. [Amendments 11-27](#); [amendments proposed but not ratified](#)

We will a class meeting on Wednesday, February 10.

FIRST EXAM: February 11-12, 15-16

III. WEEKS 5, 6, &7: Public Opinion and the Mass Media (Chaps. 4 & 5)

- A. Examine the websites [Roper Center for Public Opinion Research](#), [The Gallup Organization](#), [Harris Poll Online](#), and [Public Agenda Online](#)
- B. Definitions and characteristics;
- C. Political socialization and its agents;

- D. Mass media and the "Madison Avenue" approach to politics: politicians as soap and toothpaste.
- E. The mass media: are they "out of touch" and can they be believed?
- F. The talk radio and talk t.v. phenomena)

IV. WEEK 8: Interest Groups and Political Parties (Chaps. 6&7)

- A. What is a political party? See [Directory of U. S. Political Parties](#).
- B. Party identification in the American electorate
- C. Functions of political parties
- D. Party systems: one-, two-, and multi-

- E. Why a two-party system in the United States?
- F. Party organization and structure
- G. Party lineage, doctrine, and dominance

SECOND EXAM: MID-TERM WEEK March 9

V. WEEK 9: The Selection of Actors/Voting and Elections (Ch. 8)

- A. Constitutional standards of eligibility
- B. Formal requirements for voting
- C. Party identification and participation in politics
- D. Ballot systems
- E. Expansion of the suffrage
- F. Nominating methods
- G. Campaign strategy, techniques, and finance; federal election laws and the Federal Election Commission
- H. The voting decision
- I. Turnout and voting patterns
- J. Typology of elections
- K. Do elections matter?
- L. Go to the official websites of the national Democratic and Republican parties.
- M. So you want to run for office? Things to consider.

VII. WEEK9, 10, 11: The Political System, Part I: [Congress](#) (Article I of the Constitution and relevant amendments; chapter 9 in text)

- A. The origin and powers of Congress
- B. Recruitment: what types of people run for Congress?
- C. Professionalization and turnover; are term limits needed?
- D. Current party alignment in the [House](#) and [Senate](#)
- E. Party cohesion and party discipline
- F. Representative roles and duties
- G. The two houses: the House and Senate
 - 1. leadership
 - 2. committees, their chairmen, and seniority
 - 3. major differences
- H. The legislative process, including the House Rules Committee, the discharge petition, the filibuster, and the President
- I. Congress in the American system:
 - 1. special functions: confirmations, ratifications, investigations; [impeachments](#). Foreign v. domestic policy
 - 2. the powers of the legislative branch compared to those of the executive and judicial branches
 - 3. evaluation; [Project VoteSmart](#): How to Learn About Your Representatives in Congress

Spring Break: March 23

THIRD EXAM: APRIL 1-2, 4-5

VIII. WEEK 11-12: The Political System, Part II: [The Presidency](#) (Article II, relevant amendments and Chapters 10 & 11).

William J. Bennett: *The President is the symbol of who the people of the United States are. He is the person who stands for us in the eyes of the world and the eyes of our children.*

- A. The origin and powers of the Presidency
- B. Recruitment: what types of men run for President?
- C. Conceptions of executive power; the "undefined residuum"
- D. Functions and duties
- E. The five types of agencies and departments, their duties and functions
- F. The civil service
- G. The powers of the executive branch compared to those of the legislative and judicial branches
- H. Evaluating Presidents and the Presidency

IX. WEEK 11: The Political System, Part III: [The Judiciary](#) (Article III, relevant amendments, *Federalist* # 78 and Chapter 12).

- A. The origin and powers of the judicial branch
- B. Recruitment: what types of people become judges?
- C. Basic concepts and definitions
- D. About the Supreme Court
- E. Selected important decisions of the Supreme Court
- F. Contributions of Chief Justice John Marshall
- G. The powers of the judicial branch compared to those of the executive and legislative branches
- H. The Judiciary in the American system: activism v. restraint

The Founding Fathers did not establish the United States as a democratic republic so that elected officials would decide trivia, while all great questions would be decided by the judiciary." Judge Andrew Kleinfeld,
United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 1996

X. WEEK 13, 14, 15: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights (Amendments 1 - 10 & 14, Chapter 13)

- A. The Bill of Rights
- B. The 14th Amendment and the *Incorporation Doctrine*
- C. The Bill of Rights interpreted and applied today
- D. Criminal Justice in America
- E. Evaluation

XI. WEEK 15, 16: Public Policy, Foreign and Domestic (Chapters 14 & 15)

- A. Promoting the general welfare
- B. Social Security, Medicare
- C. Regulating the economy
- D. Taxing and spending: the budget and the national debt; see [Tax Foundation](#)
- E. National security and international affairs: the Cold War and its aftermath

XII. Concluding Observations

Last Class: April 27 – SIXTEEN TOTAL CLASS MEETINGS