

17.20: Introduction to the American Political Process Spring 2004

Professor:

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Welcome to Introduction to the American Political Process. This course, as the title implies, is intended to present you with an introduction to American government and the political system. This is not a history course, nor is it a class on current affairs (though both of these subjects are critical to the study of political science). Instead, we will focus on currents of thought among social scientists about the workings of U.S. politics and develop a *systematic* way to think about political institutions, behaviors, and traditions in the United States.

Requirements and Expectations

You are expected to attend lecture and sections. You are further expected to come prepared to discuss the issues raised in the readings. Please read the assigned materials *before class* on the date they are listed. Feel free to ask questions about current events, assigned readings, or lecture material during or after lecture.

To meet the purpose of the course, you will be expected to both consume and digest readings from scholarly and journalistic sources. You are also expected to be aware of current events, especially relating to American politics. I highly recommend that you subscribe to and read a national newspaper, such as the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times*.

Lectures are an important part of the class. However, in two hours a week, I can only hope to provide you with an introduction to the material. The lectures will attempt to give you a framework for thinking about the readings. Hopefully, they will help you build a more comprehensive picture of each week's topic from the assigned texts.

Grading

This is a communication intensive course. As such you are required to write at least 25 pages and participate in class discussions. Your grade will be determined as follows:

1. 20 percent participation: Regular attendance and participation in class discussion is required.

2. 20 percent weekly assignment: Each Tuesday, you will be given a short assignment to complete by the Thursday class. These assignments will help prepare you to write the three papers due during the course of the semester
3. 45 percent papers: Over the course of the semester, you will write three 6-8 page papers. The papers are due on March 11th, April 22nd, and May 11th. Details concerning these assignments will be handed out in class two weeks before the paper is due. The first paper will be rewritten based on comments from your TAs and turned in on April 13th.
4. 15 percent observation paper. During the first month or so of the course I would like you to attend the meeting of a local governmental body – city council, school board, state legislature, or court. You are to write a paper at least five pages in length on your observations. What is the authority of the body you observed? Who is on this body and how is it organized? What issues or cases did the organization address at the meeting you attended? Who attended the meeting and who participated in the meeting? How did the deliberations go (that is, who spoke about what)? What decisions were made and how? Finally, offer observations about what you learned about decision-making within this body (even if obvious).

I expect that all papers will be turned in *on time*: no exceptions; no excuses. In addition, plagiarism is entirely unacceptable. Should you turn in a plagiarized paper, appropriate University sanctions will be pursued. If you are unclear what constitutes plagiarism, please talk to me. Finally, grades for your paper will be based on both substance and style. The papers will be graded on the quality of thought and analysis, the research you do, and the quality of writing. Use proper grammar, appropriate language and (please, please, please) proofread and spell-check the final copy of your paper before turning it in.

Required Reading

A course pack is available at Copytech. I will also be making great use of the following books and I suggest you purchase them:

Books for you to purchase:

Charles Cameron, *Veto Bargaining*

John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*

John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*

Robert Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution?*

Course Outline

Note: “CP” designates readings contained in the course pack.

1. Introduction and Preliminaries (Feb 3)

2. What is the Role of Government? (Feb 5)

Readings: James Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*, Chapter 19. (CP); Constitution (available at: <http://www.usconstitution.net/>)

Institutions and American Politics

3. Understanding Institutions: The Median Voter Theorem (Feb 10)

Readings: Charles Stewart, *Analyzing Congress*, Chapter 1 (CP)

Assignment: Identify your Member of Congress and describe the characteristics of your congressional district.

4. Agenda Setting: The Committee Model (Feb 12, Feb 19)

Readings: Keith Krehbiel, *Pivotal Politics*, Chapters 1-2 (CP); Fenno, *Congressmen in Committees*, Chapter 1 (CP)

Assignment: What committees does your Member of Congress belong to?

5. Making Legislation: Veto Players (Feb 24, Feb 26)

Readings: Charles Cameron, *Veto Bargaining*, Chapters 1, 3, 5, 8, 9

Assignment: Identify a piece of legislation under consideration by a committee your Member of Congress serves upon. Where is the bill in the legislative process? What is the likelihood it will pass (make use of ADA scores and/or NOMINATE score as discussed in class).

6. Making Legislation: Ideas and Policy Entrepreneurs (March 2, March 4)

Readings: John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, Chapters 1, 4, 8, 9

Assignment: Where did the legislation you described last week come from? Who proposed the bill? What interest groups and other political actors were involved in its creation?

7. The Preferences of Policymakers: Elections and Responsiveness (March 9, March 11)

Readings: Morris Fiorina "The Decline of Collective Responsibility in American Politics" (CP), Steve Ansolabehere, Jim Snyder, and Charles Stewart "Candidate Positions in Congressional Elections" (Available on www.jstor.org)

Public Opinion, Elections, and Democracy

8. Campaigns and Elections (March 16, March 18)

Readings: Larry Bartels, "Candidate Choice and the Dynamics of the Presidential Nominating Process" (Available on www.jstor.org); Andrew Gellman and Gary King, "Why Are American Presidential Election Campaign Polls so Variable When Votes Are so Predictable?" (Available on www.jstor.org)

9. The Measure and Meaning of Public Opinion (March 30, April 1)
Readings: Henry Brady and Gary Orren, Chapter 4 in Mann and Orren, ed., *Media Polls in American Politics* (CP), Chapter 4; John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Chapters 2-4
Assignment: Choose a topic of interest to you from the list of policy areas circulated in class. Find 10 polling items that measure opinion in your area of interest.
10. The Structure of Public Opinion (April 6, April 8)
Readings: Donald Kinder, "Opinion and Action in the Realm of Politics (CP)
Assignment: Write a series of questions designed to measure opinion in your area of interest.
11. Understanding Public Opinion and American Politics: War and Race (April 13, April 15, April 22)
Readings: John Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Vietnam and Korea" (Available on www.jstor.com); John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Chapter 9; Kinder and Sanders, *Divided by Color*, Chapters 4, 7 (CP)

Personal Interests and Political Equality

12. Mobilization of Interests (April 27, April 29)
Readings: Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, Chapters 1 and 2 (CP); Kritzer "The Government Gorilla: Why Does Government Come out Ahead?" (available at: http://polisci.wisc.edu/~kritzer/research/law_misc/gorilla.pdf)
Assignment: Return to the legislation you discussed in your first paper. Describe which political interests are involved in the consideration of the bill.
13. Participation and the Political System (May 3, May 6)
Readings: Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, Chapters 4-6 (CP); Dahl, *Who Governs*, Chapters 1, 19, 24, 27 and 28 (CP)
Assignment: Describe the patterns of political mobilization surrounding your chosen piece of legislation. Who is involved in the political process? Who is not? What are the consequences of who is involved for the shape of public policy?

American Politics: Bringing it all Together

14. The Welfare Implications of Government (May 11)
Readings: Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* Entire
15. Conclusions (May 13th)
No Reading