PLSC S113: Introduction to American Politics

Instructor: Baobao Zhang

baobao.zhang@yale.edu | http://baobaofzhang.github.io/
Course Time: July 2 to August 3, 2018; Monday, Wednesday, Friday 1:00-3:15pm
Course Location: TBA
Office Hours: TBA

Overview

Why was Donald Trump elected in the 2016 U.S. presidential election? Are Americans more polarized than ever? Why is passing legislation in Congress so difficult? This course considers these and many more important questions.

The course is an introduction to the study of American government and politics. In five short weeks, the course covers a wide range of topics, including the constitutional foundations of the U.S., political institutions, mass politics, the media, political parties, and interest groups. Students will also have the opportunity to explore other topics interesting to them through essay assignments. Besides acquiring substantive knowledge about American politics, students will also learn how to think like political scientists by reading and discussing contemporary works in the discipline.

Learning Goals

By the end of this course students will be able to:

- Describe the roles of the three main branches of the U.S. government
- Describe how the public, the media, political parties, and interest groups shape politics
- Understand the various tools political scientists use to study politics
- Write essays that critically analyze issues in U.S. politics today

Course Format

The course will meet 15 times over five weeks. The first hour of each class consists of a lecture on the readings. The second hour of each class consists of a seminar-style discussion relating the textbook reading to the other readings; students will sometimes be asked to do activities in groups. There will be a 15-minute break between the first and second hour of the class.
Attendance Policy

Because summer session courses are so compressed, students are expected to attend every class. There are no dean’s excuses to miss a class during the summer. If one has an emergency situation such that one cannot attend a class, please let the instructor know as soon as possible.

Use of Electronic Devices

No electronic devices may be used during the first hour of class. Studies have shown that using electronic devices to take notes decreases academic performance and distracts other students. Please take notes by hand instead. Furthermore, lecture notes will be posted on Canvas before class. Students may use electronic devices in the second hour of class as some of the activities require internet access.

Course Requirements

Course requirements and their contributions to students’ final grades are described below:

- **Quiz** (15%): Each class begins with a short quiz based on the assigned readings. Each quiz is multiple-choice and closed-book.
- **Discussion participation** (10%): Students are expected to actively engage in the discussion component of the class.
- **Essays** (40%): Students will write two essays on topics they are interested in and related to the course. The assignment will assess one’s ability to think critically about issues in American politics and relate it to the course material. Each essay should be five-pages long, with size 12 Times New Roman font and one-inch size margins.
- **Final exam** (35%): The final exam is a comprehensive assessment of students’ knowledge of the course material and critical thinking skills. The two-hour, closed-book exam consists of answering 30 multiple-choice questions and writing two analytical essays.

Schedule of Major Assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay 1</td>
<td>Sunday, End of Week 2, 5pm; submit using Canvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay 2</td>
<td>Sunday, End of Week 4, 5pm; submit using Canvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>End of Week 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grading

Below is information regarding how each component will be graded:

- Each quiz is worth one point in total.
- Discussion participation is out of 10 points in total.
- Each essay is worth 20 points in total and graded according to a rubric given to students as part of the assignment. For each hour an essay is submitted late, the grade for the essay will be lowered by one point.
- The final exam is worth 35 points.

Grades will not be curved. The grading scale of the course is: A (93-100 points), A- (90-92 points), B+ (87-89 points), B (83-86 points), B- (80-82 points), C+ (77-79 points), C (73-76 points), C- (70-72 points), D+ (67-69 points), D (65-66 points), F (below 65 points).

Course Readings

The main textbook for the course is:

Please buy or rent the correct edition of the textbook. The cheapest option is to rent an electronic copy of the textbook for $35. Readings from the textbook will be supplemented by academic journal articles, chapters from books, or newspaper articles. One can download most academic journal articles for free on the Yale internet network. Selections from books will be scanned and posted on Canvas.

Students are also expected to keep up with current events during the course. Free print copies of the New York Times are available in the colleges. Reliable free online news sources include:

- Public broadcasting websites: NPR, BBC, PBS
- Print/online news: The Guardian, Associated Press, Reuters
- Analysis of political news: Vox, FiveThirtyEight

Important Information

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is very important to learning at Yale University. Academic dishonesty impedes one’s learning and robs others’ of their contributions to knowledge. Therefore, cheating and plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course. During quizzes and the final exam, students will not be allowed to consult each other, written materials, or the internet. On all written assignments, students must acknowledge works, words, or ideas that are not their own. When writing essays, students must cite the original author using a
common citation format (MLA, APA, Harvard, or Chicago). Those who cheat or plagiarize will face serious consequences, including disciplinary action by the dean.
Please see Yale College Undergraduate Regulations for the university’s policies towards academic integrity. [http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduate-regulations/policies/definitions-plagiarism-cheating/](http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduate-regulations/policies/definitions-plagiarism-cheating/)

**Adjustments and Accommodations for Disability**

Any student with a documented disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to speak with the instructor during the first week of class. All discussions will remain confidential.
Students with disabilities should also contact Judy York in the Resource Office on Disabilities, 35 Broadway, Rm 222, 203-432-2324.

**Expectations in the Classroom**

The instructor is committed to maintaining a positive learning environment for all students. Students are expected to 1) complete all readings before attending each class and 2) participate in discussions and team activities during the second hour of each class. Because this course is about politics, the class will discuss topics where people may reasonably disagree with each other. All are welcome to contribute their ideas; at the same time, everyone should treat each other with respect. Students should not engage in disruptive behaviors that harm learning for others.

**Course Schedule and Readings**

**Week 1**

**Class 1: Introduction to American politics; how do we study politics?**
Textbook: Chapter 1
Other readings:
- Handouts on political science methodology

**Class 2: Historical origins of the U.S. government; the Constitution**
Textbook: Chapter 2
Other readings:
- *The Federalist Papers* Nos. 10, 51 (Textbook A34)

**Class 3: Federalism and the separation of power**
Textbook: Chapter 3
Other readings:

**Optional field trip**
During Week 1, there is an optional field trip to the Yale University Art Gallery for a guided tour of John Trumbull’s paintings.

**Week 2**

**Class 4: Civil rights**
Textbook: Chapter 4
Other readings:

**Class 5: Congress**
Textbook: Chapter 5
Other readings:
• Mayhew, David R. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. Yale University Press, 1974. Chapter 1

**Class 6: The Presidency**
Textbook: Chapter 6
Other readings:

**Week 3**

**Class 7: The Executive Branch; Bureaucracy**
Textbook: Chapter 7
Other readings:

**Class 8: Federal Courts**
Textbook: Chapter 8
Other readings:

Class 9: Public opinion; political identity
Textbook: Chapter 9
Other readings:

Week 4

Class 10: Media, old and new
Textbook: none
Other readings:

Class 11: Elections and political participation
Textbook: Chapter 10
Other readings:

Class 12: Political parties
Textbook: Chapter 11
Other readings:
Week 5

Class 13: Groups and interests
Textbook: Chapter 12
Other readings:

Class 14: Politics and public policy
Textbook: Chapter 13
Other readings:

Class 15: Final exam; challenges to American democracy
Final exam:
- 30 minutes: 30 multiple choice questions
- 45 minutes: one essay interpreting quantitative and qualitative evidence
- 45 minutes: one argumentation essay that requires knowledge and reasoning

Readings that will help you answer questions on the final exam:
- Any two of the recent reports from the Bright Line Watch [http://brightlinewatch.org/](http://brightlinewatch.org/)