INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

PLSC 113

Yale University

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Course Description

This course is designed to be an introduction to American government, its historical foundations, institutions and political processes. The purpose of this class is to teach you about the institutions, practices, and history of politics and government in the United States. This course will cover a great deal of ground, as we will discuss the Constitution, the three branches of the federal government, interest groups, public opinion, campaigns, elections, and parties. For each subject, we will examine some of the leading perspectives in political science, and we will incorporate current events and our personal experiences, as well.

The main textbook for this course, The Logic of American Politics, takes a novel approach to the study of American politics. It frames the course in terms of understanding collective action problems. A collective action problem exists when people would be better off if they cooperated, but they cant help acting in their own interests, even if that makes everyone worse off. Over time, we have developed institutions to solve some collective action problems. The book, along with the course, investigates the kinds of collective action problems we have faced in our history, the solutions weve come up with to address them, and the success weve had in resolving them.

In addition to the textbook, we will also read scholarly political science articles on the relevant topics. This will serve as an introduction to what professional political scientists who study American Politics actually do. No previous background in social science is required, for the most part we will read the articles with an eye toward the main conclusions and how they apply to contemporary American politics.

Course Objectives

- To understand the structures and processes of American government and politics, the collective action challenges inherent in this system, and the practical implications of political structure and contestation in our lives.

1Many thanks to Greg Huber for sharing his resources for a similar course.
• To sharpen our ability to think critically about the American political system by reading both contemporary and classic materials from a variety of sources that encompasses both objective and opinion-based points of view.

• To demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of contemporary political debates.

• To establish introductory knowledge of what professional political scientists who study American politics do and what that research says about contemporary issues.

COURSE MATERIALS

The following book is required:


• Abbreviated as KJKV in the course outline

The book can be found in the bookstore, though you may find it cheaper online. Additional reading material will be made available on canvas.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The course is broken down into several subcomponents for evaluation purposes. They are described, along with their weights for grading, in what follows.

**Participation:** 10%. Participation incorporates attendance as well as active participation exhibited by asking questions, engaging in class discussion, and performance during any in-class group or individual exercises. Simply showing up to class is not sufficient to receive all participation points. *Active* engagement is also required.

**Quizzes:** 15%. There will be a short quiz at the beginning of every class period except the first day, the midterm period, and the final period. These quizzes will be based on that days readings. As such these will not be “gotcha” quizzes but rather straightforward assessments of whether or not you did the reading. I expect that there will be 7 or 8 quizzes total and I will drop your single lowest quiz grade.

**Midterm exam:** 35%. The midterm will be some mix of identification, short answer, and essay questions. Both the midterm and the final are designed to test your familiarity with the lecture material, reading assignments, and your independent ability to apply what you have learned. The midterm will take place on July 15th in class. After the midterm exam we may resume the course schedule if we need to in order to stay on topic.

**Final exam:** 40%. The final exam will take place on the last day of class and will be identical in terms of question types to the midterm exam. The final exam is cumulative in the sense that questions may be posed from any portion of the course. However, expect the exam to include more questions pertaining to the second half of the course than the first (example: ~ 2/3 of the questions may come from the last half of the course and ~ 1/3 questions may come from the first half of the course).
Grading scale. Grades will not be curved and will follows a standard scale: A (93–100%); A- (90–92%); B+ (87–89%); B (83–86%); B- (80–82%); C+ (77–79%); C (73–76%); C- (70–72%); D+ (67–69%); D (63–66%); D- (60–62%); F (below 60%).

MAKEUP AND LATE WORK
Given that this is a five week course we are doing a lot in a short period. As such, I do not expect that there will be many circumstances in which makeups will be required. The scheduled dates of all exams and written assignments are clearly indicated in this syllabus. No make-up exams or late papers will be accepted without my prior approval.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
I am happy to accommodate students with disabilities. Requests go through the Yale University Resource Office on Disabilities. If you feel you need accommodation please contact the Resource Office on Disabilities. Information, including for making contact, can be found at their website.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Plagiarism is the use of someone else’s work, words, or ideas as if they were your own. Here are three reasons not to do it:

- By far the deepest consequence to plagiarizing is the detriment to your intellectual and moral development: you won’t learn anything, and your ethics will be corrupted.
- Giving credit where its due but adding your own reflection will get you higher grades than putting your name on someone else’s work. In an academic context, it counts more to show your ideas in conversation than to try to present them as sui generis.
- Finally, Yale punishes academic dishonesty severely. The most common penalty is suspension from the university, but students caught plagiarizing are also subject to lowered or failing grades as well as the possibility of expulsion. Please be sure to review Yale’s Academic Integrity Policy (available in the Student Handbook).

You can also find Definitions of Plagiarism, Cheating, and Documentation of Sources here.

The Yale Writing Center also offers guidance on making sure that you avoid academic dishonesty. More information can be found at their website.

COURSE OUTLINE
Note: I reserve the right to alter the syllabus as needed. I will make sure any and all changes to the outline are clearly communicated to you and that you will have ample time to adjust (for assignments, etc.) if need be. I will not “spring” changes on you without notice.

Week 1: July 1st and July 3rd

Monday, July 1: The Logic of American Politics and The Constitution
- KJKV, Chapters 1 and 2
Wednesday, July 3: Federalism

- KJKV, Chapter 3
- Federalist Papers 16, 17, 39, 46, and 51 [available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/fed.asp]

Week 2: July 8th and July 10th

Monday, July 8: Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

- KJKV, Chapters 4 and 5

Wednesday, July 10: Congress and The Presidency

- KJKV, Chapters 6 and 7
  
  Scholarly readings on Congress:

  Scholarly readings on the Presidency:

**Week 3: July 15th and July 17th**

*Monday, July 15*: Recap and **Midterm Exam**

- Covers chapters 1–7

*Wednesday, July 17*: The Bureaucracy and The Federal Judiciary

- KSKJ, Chapters 8 and 9

  **Scholarly readings on the Bureaucracy:**


    [IGNORE THE MATH, JUST FOCUS ON THE ARGUMENT/LOGIC]

  **Scholarly readings on the Judiciary:**


**Week 4: July 22nd and July 24th**

*Monday, July 22*: Public Opinion and Voting, Campaigns, and Elections

- KSKJ, Chapters 10 and 11

  **Scholarly readings on public opinion, voting, and campaigns:**


    - A short policy brief about the study: https://bit.ly/2Hg9bJH


  **Scholarly readings about elections:**


Wednesday, July 24: Political Parties and Interest Groups

- KSKJ, Chapters 12 and 13

  Scholarly readings about parties:


  Scholarly readings about interest groups:


Week 5: July 29th and July 31st

Monday, July 29: The Media and Is There A Logic to American Politics?

- KSKJ, Chapters 14 and 15

  Scholarly readings about media:


Wednesday, July 31:

- Wrap-up, recap, and Final Exam