Introduction and course objectives

This course introduces you to the study of American government. We will focus on political processes such as voting and lobbying the government, on political institutions such as Congress, the president, and the federal courts, and on political principles that are part of the constitutional structure or of public opinion in America. Our guiding question is to what extent political decision-making adequately addresses the nature of policy problems, and to what extent it reflects the political power distribution in society and the interests of important actors.

Why this course is good for you? First, if you are majoring in the social sciences or the humanities, politics is important because it is an important part of human behavior. Second, as a citizen, you have to know the American political system to participate effectively. Third, you will learn how political scientists investigate political phenomena. Fourth, if you are a political science major (or consider becoming one), this course provides you with a basic introduction into American politics and important research techniques used in political science.

At the end of this course, you will be able to

• describe institutions, actors, and processes involved in American policy-making;
• analyze the historical development of American political values and institutions such as the Constitution, Congress, the presidency and bureaucracy, and the Supreme Court;
• determine the factors that influence the behavior of politicians, voters, and other relevant actors;
• discuss which issues can be solved politically and which are better addressed outside government;
• explain why certain policy problems have been addressed by American governments and others haven’t;
• use library databases to identify high-quality resources for the study of U.S. politics;
• critically evaluate the purpose and reliability of different news sources;
• obtain information on public opinion polls and congressional bills.

Texts

The following book is required for this course:

The following book is recommended (you may own it if you are taking WRIT 103 this term):

Assignments

Exams

There are four midterm exams and a final. The first and last midterms each counts for 10% of the final grade, the two middle midterms count for 15% each, and the final counts for 30%.

I do not give makeup exams. Missed exams receive an F. The only exception is in cases of emergencies of a medical or similar kind. In such cases, you have to provide me with documentation signed by the dean of your college, athletic director, or the equivalent. The missed exam will be made up with the average grade of your other exams in this course. I will have the final decision as to what constitutes acceptable excuses. Holiday travel does not constitute a valid excuse.

Research assignments

During the first week of classes, we will form work and study groups of about five students each. I will give each group several research assignments; the assignments will give you the opportunity to develop information retrieval, analysis, and communication skills and to get a close-up look at several of the electoral races that currently take place. You share your research results in the form of blog posts on the class blog (http://broscheid.edublogs.org). As a result, you can benefit from the information obtained by other groups, and you can give and receive helpful comments.

Every work group also has to take responsibility for taking notes in a class meeting and posting them on a wiki (you get an email invitation to the wiki site and additional instructions on how to post the notes). The students who do not post the notes have to add to the notes or leave comments pointing to possible additions or errors. The purpose of this assignment is to introduce you to collaborative writing and to help you deal with the large amount of information that you have to learn in this course.

Your group can meet in person (some assignments will require this) or on the internet - through Facebook, instant messaging, wikis, etc. If you need any assistance setting up online meetings, let me know.

The group work counts for 20% of the final grade.
Film nights

Part of the course is a series of five Tuesday evening film nights. There are two ways you can watch the movies: (1) Attend the film nights at Memorial Hall. (2) Rent or buy the film and watch it with your study group. You’ll have to watch the film before the first class meeting after the film night. In order to get credit for the movie, your study group has to let me know that you watched the movie on your own, and who actually attended.

Attendance at the film events will be taken with worksheets that quiz you about the films.

Attendance and participation

Regular attendance tends to improve students’ exam grades, so I recommend that you do not skip classes. Also, if you miss more than 40% of the class meetings, you will automatically fail the course.

The political science department does not give WF or WP grades. Consult your student handbook about the JMU drop policy. It is your responsibility to make sure you are enrolled in the course. If you want to drop the course, it is your responsibility to do so before the university deadlines. Students who miss the first two class meetings will be administratively withdrawn from the course.

Web resources

The class web site can be found at http://broscheid.edublogs.org/. At this location, you can find an updated copy of the syllabus, information on all deadlines and class policies, links to additional readings, and so on. Since this site is a blog, you can subscribe to its RSS feed and get automatic information on all updates. Also, you can leave comments and questions.

Since the main class site is public, I will post all confidential information such as grades on Blackboard. Also, you can find additional data for lab assignments on Blackboard.

The wiki for your class notes is located at http://gposc225f08.wetpaint.com/. Only participants in this class will be able to add to and change the wiki. During the first week of classes, you will receive an invitation to join the wiki. Please do join it, and let me know if you don’t get the invitation.

ODS statement

Students with disabilities who require reasonable accommodations to fully participate in course activities and/or meet course requirements must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) and contact me to discuss access issues. ODS will provide you with an Access Plan Letter that will verify your need for services and make recommendations for accommodations to be used in my classroom. ODS is located in the Wilson Learning Center, Room 107; Phone: 568-6705.

Class Schedule

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<thead>
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<th><strong>Monday</strong></th>
<th><strong>Tuesday</strong></th>
<th><strong>Wednesday</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 25th</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26th</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction, Syllabus</td>
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<td>27th Theoretical foundations. Readings: Kernell/Jacobson, ch. 1: &quot;The Logic of American Politics.&quot;</td>
<td>29th Class does not meet; schedule work group meeting!</td>
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<td>Sep 1st</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2nd</td>
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<td>The Constitution</td>
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<td>Film night: “So Goes the Nation” 6:30-9:30, Memorial Hall.</td>
<td>10th Federalism. Readings: K+J, ch. 3.</td>
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<td>15th</td>
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<td>16th</td>
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<td>Federalism</td>
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<td>Civil Rights Readings: K+J, ch. 4.</td>
<td>19th Civil Rights</td>
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<td>30th</td>
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<td>Congress. Readings: K+J, ch. 6.</td>
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<td>Oct 1st Congress.</td>
<td>3rd Congress.</td>
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<td>Congress.</td>
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<td>Film night: Recount 6:30-9:30, Memorial Hall.</td>
<td>8th Congress.</td>
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<td>4th</td>
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<td>Public Opinion.</td>
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<td>5th Elections and Voting. Readings: K+J, ch. 11.</td>
<td>7th THIRD MIDTERM</td>
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<td>Interest Groups</td>
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<td>Readings: K+J, ch. 13</td>
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<td>8th</td>
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<td>9th</td>
<td>12th</td>
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<td>Final Exam: 8:00-10:00 am (sigh!)</td>
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<td>3rd Media</td>
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