

POLIT 1560 (40359): Fall Semester, 2009

American Government: An Introduction to the Study of Politics in the U.S.A.

As taught by: Dr. Keith John Lepak, Department of Political Science
Classroom: 202 Williamson Hall, 9:00-9:50 AM on MWF

Course Description and Objectives: Now is the time to pay attention to, and study, American government. We live in a time of gathering political and economic crisis. The first decade of your adult working lives will be spent reacting to unprecedented problems of political leadership at all levels of American public policymaking, especially those at the national level. Many Americans are deeply frustrated with “government” and “politics”—but oddly, the only reasonable response to this situation is MORE politics. What Americans like to call “democracy” has never been simple; it requires conflicting views, and to paraphrase Winston Churchill, it’s the worst way to govern human affairs except for everything else that’s been tried.

This course seeks to familiarize students with the fundamental political ideas (and ideals) of the American constitutional state, as well as with the basic concepts used to label, study, and debate the meanings of American politics. The idea of “government” is expressed through institutions which are created and influenced by the behaviors of individuals and groups. Ideas, institutions, and behaviors are the principal organizing themes of the course. Developing a distinct and shared vocabulary is necessary if one is to learn how to think about, and discuss, politics intelligently; to “study” politics is about much more than having “an opinion”. The course also seeks to help students understand selected contemporary political issues, particularly those connected with the current crisis of American governance. Understanding cannot develop without some sense of critical political inquiry, which is the art of asking questions. The art of asking questions depends on paying attention, listening and observing, and developing a vocabulary that allows you to ask better questions.

The course operates as an “open lecture”: I will always have a presentation organized around a set of questions and propositions (and will be asking you questions at times), but students are free at any time to raise questions or pose their own views; students also have the opportunity at the start of each class session to raise questions or put forward arguments or observations that you think are important in regard to what has been discussed, or in regard to events occurring in the “real world” of current politics.

This is also a general education course in the domain of “Societies and Institutions” (SI). As such, it seeks to impart a comparative understanding of Western and non-Western political societies, to examine how different ideas, institutions, and behaviors have influenced such societies, and to consider the nature of human “diversity” for political and social stability, economic development, and political decision-making.

Instructor’s Office, Office Hours, and Contact Numbers:

Office: 429 DeBartolo Hall (in Sociology & Anthropology suite, across from the main Political Science office)
Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday, 10:00-10:50 AM & 2:00-2:50 PM; Friday, 10:00-10:50 AM and 12:00-12:30 PM; Tuesday/Thursday, 10:30-10:55 AM & 1:30-2:15 PM; all other times by appointment

NOTE: If I am not in during other non-teaching hours and you need to see me, please leave a message with Mrs. Ellis in the main office or on my voicemail, or email me so that I can contact you. Don’t hesitate to come to me with any questions that you may have.

Office Phone: 330-941-3437; *Departmental Phone:* 330-941-3436;
Home phone (Sharon, PA): 724-346-5409

Office Email: kilepak@ysu.edu

Assigned Course Reading:

- 1) *Los Angeles Times* online service (www.latimes.com/) TBA
- 2) *The Washington Post* online service (www.washingtonpost.com/) TBA

There is no assigned textbook for my sections of POLIT 1560 (note that other instructors may have a textbook). We will rely on internet readings and selected articles from the news services noted above (both of which have free access). About every three weeks, you will receive an email from me summarizing the assignments that have been made. At certain times, I will be distributing printed material in the classroom (HINT: be here). You are also invited to bring in short readings or online references that are relevant to the course; consult with me if you’d like to do so. Whenever there is an assigned electronic reading, make a hard copy for class discussion and retain it with your notes. If you find yourself having problems with the reading or classroom discussion, come and see me.

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Grades:

Grades are based on the following:

- 1) two exams (midterm at 20% and final at 30%) = 50%
- 2) four quizzes (two vocabulary, two short-answer, scheduled on two-day notice: 10% each) = 40%
- 3) attendance and participation = 10%

OPTIONAL: extra-credit project (see last page)

Exams consist of short-answer, multiple-choice, and essay questions, with considerable choice among questions. The final exam is not cumulative. Quizzes consist of vocabulary terms, concept identification, and short-answer questions. Classroom discussion, assigned reading, and complementary reading may be the basis for questions that appears on exams and quizzes. No student may take an exam or quiz *before* the regularly scheduled time; if you are absent on the day of an exam/quiz, you **MUST** contact me **THAT SAME DAY** in order to arrange a makeup. Any makeup tests must be completed within **ONE WEEK** of the originally scheduled exam/quiz. All tests are graded on the basis of a strict ten-point incremental scale (A = 100-90, B = 89-80, C = 79-70, D = 69-60, F = 59/below).

Your regular attendance is critical to how well you are able to do in this course. I take attendance daily; please inform me if you are ill, have an emergency, or otherwise are dealing with circumstances that prevent you from attending class. Participation can take various forms, both inside and outside the classroom; what's most important here is your regular attendance. Check in with me at the end of the hour if you are late for any session. Thanks.

NOTE: Incomplete (I) grades, if requested, must be completed within the following year; after that period, any outstanding I grade automatically changes to an F. You can only request an Incomplete (I) if you have completed at least one piece of graded work and are passing the course.

Student Services:

In keeping with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), any student requiring special adaptations or accommodations should inform the instructor as soon as possible. If you have a documented disability and require accommodations to learn effectively in this course, please contact the Office of Disability Services (330-941-1372) at the beginning of the semester, or when given an assignment for which special accommodations may be required. Students with disabilities must verify their eligibility through the Office of Disability Services.

Any student is also eligible to use the services of the Center for Student Progress, located in the Kilcawley Center. The Center provides assistance in reading and study skills, exam preparation and test-taking, course tutoring, and other supplemental instruction and general advising on campus life. Call 941-3538 if you would like more information from the Center, or talk with your instructor.

Classroom Etiquette and Rules:

PLEASE NOTE—the use of laptop or notebook computers is **NOT** allowed during active class time; computers may not be on your desktop. Cell phones must be **TURNED OFF** and kept **OUT OF SIGHT** while class is in session. If you need to take a call while in class, please sit near the door so that you may exit promptly in order to speak in the hallway. Solid food is **NOT** allowed but you may bring something to drink. If you wish to speak during class, please raise your hand so that I may recognize you—do **NOT** speak out of turn without having been recognized or called upon. The point of these measures is to demonstrate consideration of your fellow students, and to support our common concern with maintaining the appropriate level of attention conducive to effective learning. Thanks!

COURSE SCHEDULE: General Topics for Discussion & Reading

Week 1-3: 24 August to 11 September

(Last day to add: August 31; Holiday September 7)

--Getting organized: Welcome!

--Studying "politics": ideas, institutions, behaviors

--"Politics" and "power", "Government", "State", and "Law"

--Thinking about "America"—a "country", a "nation", and a "federal" state of "states"

--The study of "politics" and "political science" in the United States (APSA)

*Harold Lasswell: who gets what, when, how—the key questions

--Crises of American government and politics: "history" and the contemporary crisis

READING: TBA (select essays from *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*; Wikipedia.com/)

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Likely: vocabulary quiz by week 3***

Week 4-6: 14 September to 2 October

- The origins of the American federal republic: empires, trade, war, and a “constitutional” state
- The Declaration of Independence: liberty, law, and “states” (and war)
- From the Articles of Confederation to the “Constitution” and the “federation”
- Suspicion of “state power”: the “rights” of persons, and the Bill of Rights
- Persons, the State, and the “market”—on the “commercial republic”

READING: TBA (WP and LAT); “United States Constitution” at www.wikipedia.com/

Likely: short-answer quiz by week 5***

Week 7-8: 5-16 October

- The Congress: institutions and behaviors
- The House of Representatives and the Senate: legislative leadership, committees, factions, and policy-making
- Legislating the “budget”
- The budget and “health care reform”

READING: TBA (WP and LAT); www.senate.gov/ and www.house.gov/

ATTENTION: 1ST EXAM ON MONDAY 19 OCTOBER***

Week 9-11: 21 October to 4 November

(Thur, Oct 29, last “W” day)

- The Presidency and Presidents: the institution and leadership behaviors
- The President and the Congress: health care “reform” and the budget
- The President and the Bureaucracy: “permanent” government
- The President, the budget, and war

READING: TBA (WP and LAT); www.whitehouse.gov/

Likely: vocabulary quiz by week 11***

Week 11-13: 6-18 November

(Wed, 11 Nov: Veterans Day Holiday, no class)

- The Judiciary: development of the “Supreme Court”
- The “independence” of the court as a political institution (and its “non-democratic” character)
- The Court, the President, and the Congress: new Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor
- “Democracy”, the Court, and the Law

READING: TBA (WP and LAT); www.supremecourtus.gov/

Week 13-15: 20 November to 4 December

(Nov 26-29: Thanksgiving break)

- Issues behind the emerging American political crisis
 - mass consumption politics and “values” confusion
 - demographics and aging of society
 - political economy of energy transition and “growth”
 - debt and tax aversion: why Obama can’t “fix” America’s problems
 - the ending of U.S. global dominance
- The emerging crisis of the 2010’s and the need to renew “political” education in America

READING: TBA (WP and LAT)

Likely: short-answer quiz by week 14***

END OF REGULAR CLASSROOM SESSIONS ON FRIDAY, 4 DECEMBER

FINAL EXAM ON WEDNESDAY, 9 DECEMBER, FROM 8:00 AM TO 10:00 AM IN REGULAR CLASSROOM

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Extra-Credit Option:

Students desiring or needing extra-credit may submit one project in the form of a book review, personal interview, current events essay, or website analysis. All project options involve formal writing; no project should be longer than four typed, double-spaced pages, or shorter than three. Only one project per student is allowed. Consider these:

- 1) A book review may address any non-fictional or fictional account of human life that deals with political problems. Check your selection of the book with me. The review should include a general summary of the arguments or plot of the book, and some kind of judgment of the work's quality. NOTE: students may not submit required reviews written on books that have been assigned in other concurrent courses; you may review a required book from another course where appropriate, but only where a review was not a part of the course's graded requirements.
- 2) A personal interview may be conducted with any public official, officer of a non-profit public issue organization, practicing (or retired) lawyer, teacher, or any other person of political note. A narrative summary or transcript of your interview and a brief letter of acknowledgement and verification from the person whom you interviewed should be submitted. Consult with me as to interview questions.
- 3) A current-events essay addresses some kind of contemporary problem by summarizing the content of at least five (5) articles taken from journalistic sources (major newspapers or online news services). You should select articles that basically focus on the same topic. Your essay has to offer an integrated summary of the articles you read, along with your own view of the problem. The essay must be accompanied by copies of all articles selected for the task.
- 4) A website analysis describes at least four websites devoted to politics, government, or political organizations. Sites should be minimally evaluated as to their visual attractiveness, timeliness of their content, and the objectivity of the material presented. A key question to consider is: what is the website NOT telling you that would be important to know about? Can you communicate with the site and do you receive substantive responses? Check your selection of websites with me.

The acceptability of your project is based essentially on its readability and competent composition (remember to PROOFREAD your finished work!). I use such projects to improve your weakest exam score by as much as 50%. You may use this option to strengthen a weak exam score or to ensure a good or excellent grade. Projects may be submitted as late as finals week. Consult with me later in the term should you wish to do this, or if you wish to discuss an alternative type of project.

AGAIN: Please feel free to see me at any time about any problems that you may be experiencing in the course; I can't read your minds. Your comments are always welcome, and each and every one of you is important. Thanks.

KJL August 2009