

Political Science 110
American Government
Western Kentucky University

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This course provides an introduction to the study of politics. It is designed to familiarize students with the operation of American political institutions and forms of political behavior. We shall begin with an examination of the foundations of American government, to identify the major issues involved in the development of the American form of government and to discuss how these concerns are reflected today. We will discuss issues of democracy, representation, civil rights, civil liberties and relations between the branches of government. We will then turn to the structures and processes of the American system, an understanding of which are essential for all citizens in a democracy, as politics influences almost all aspects of our lives. Students will develop the critical thinking skills to evaluate the performance of the American political system, in terms of participation, representation and also of efficiency in policy making. This semester is a particularly interesting time to study American politics because of the presidential election and we will pay close attention to the campaign and election.

As we progress into the new millennium, the United States enjoys the stability and prestige of economic growth, a long democratic tradition and its position as the world's only remaining global superpower. However, concerns remain within the country over social policy and there is a high degree of dissatisfaction in government, evidenced by criticism of policy gridlock, campaign finance, the role of the media and issues of morality. We need to study the structure and process of American government in order to understand the positive and negative aspects of our system of government, our relationship to it, and the position of the United States in the international system. The purpose of this course is not only to provide the necessary skills for students to understand the political system and how it relates to our everyday lives but also to engage students to develop a sense of participation and responsibility in politics. In a democracy we should not limit ourselves to being passive observers of government, rather we should become active in our community and agents of social change.

To help us understand American politics there are a number of different perspectives we can use. Firstly, classic documents on American politics, such as the Constitution or excerpts from *The Federalist Papers* to identify the concepts and issues surrounding the creation of government and the relationship between government and the people. We will discuss the classic tenets of American government such as the separation of powers, checks and balances and the relationship between the federal and state governments. We will also examine ways of looking at government through concepts such as pluralism and elitism. This **philosophical perspective** is supplemented

by a **historical perspective** which illustrates the elements of continuity and change in government. For example, the Framers of the Constitution could not have imagined the impact of television on the workings of government. A historical perspective also identifies patterns and processes in American politics and provides a rich texture to our discussions of institutions and concepts. For example, the Civil Rights Legislation of the 1960s was part of a longstanding legal and political struggle influenced by earlier decisions. We must also adopt a **current perspective** to explain current issues and identifies trends and developments in politics. A current perspective illustrates how the system of government affects our everyday lives and helps us asks questions about the direction politics is moving. Finally, we shall also use a **comparative perspective** of looking at other systems of government. Examples from other democracies and non-democratic regimes helps us to evaluate the performance of our own system and debate the merit of alternatives. For example, although many of the principles of American government are drawn from the British experience, the two democracies have very different forms of government, each with their own strengths and weaknesses.

These different perspectives provide us with the tools to explain and evaluate the system of American government. They also enable us to identify relationships between institutions, policies and processes and to predict political behavior. The examination of politics is a very useful tool to develop our critical thinking skills, skills which can be used for all aspects of study and work. To stimulate critical thinking we shall not simply describe American government but in each assignment we ask important questions about the operation of government or raise and debates important issues and policies. For example, we will not merely describe Congress, rather, we will examine how Congress works, look at how it has changed, debate why it acts in certain ways and discuss potential reforms. Similarly, for the Presidency we shall discuss presidential power and leadership styles, look at how and why the president acts in certain ways and discuss the responsibilities and expectations of the office. Each assignment will be arranged around a central question to provide a lead-in to our analysis of a particular process or institution and there will be ample time for discussion and debate.

Required Textbook

George C. Edwards III, Martin P. Wattenberg and Robert L. Lineberry, Government in America: People, Politics and Policy 15th Edition

It is also suggested that students read a quality newspaper, such as The New York Times or The Washington Post or magazine, such as The Economist to keep current on political developments.

Eighty per cent of the course grade will be determined by your lessons. The final examination constitutes the remaining twenty per cent. **YOU MUST PASS** the final examination to get credit for the course. The final examination will consist of four essay questions (out of a choice of seven). The final will be proctored. Please contact IL for more information.

Grading Scale: A = 90% or higher; B = 80-89%; C = 70-79%; D = 60-69%; F = 59% or lower.

The Lessons

The course is divided into three sections (with sixteen lessons overall). The first section covers the foundations of the American system of government. Students will analyze the importance of foundational documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. They will also examine key concepts (such as democracy, the state and nation) and key principles of government (such as federalism, civil rights and civil liberties). The second section will focus on the linkages between the people and the government in a representative democracy. These lessons will examine the role played by political parties, interest groups and the media and also explain elections in the USA. The third section will focus on the structure of the national government, with lessons on the legislative, executive and judicial branches. Each lesson will conclude with assignments. Most of the assignments are short essay or essays to foster critical thinking about how the system of government actually operates.

In compliance with university policy, students with disabilities who require accommodations (academic adjustments and/or auxiliary aids or services) for this course must contact the Office for Student Disability Services in DUC A-200 of the Student Success Center in Downing University Center.

Complete all the readings before you begin to answer the questions. DO NOT simply copy material from the textbook —this is a form of academic dishonesty (plagiarism) and will result in a score of zero for the work in question. Type your answers (double-spaced using a 12 point font). Your answers will also be graded on the proper use of English. Please use either .doc, .docx or .rtf formats for your assignments.

The assignments will consist of both short and long answer style questions. Appropriate guidelines for the length of each answer will be given for each assignment. Many questions will require critical thinking and analysis. Remember to always provide evidence for arguments that you are trying to promote or refute. It is also worth remembering that politics is constantly changing and that new laws, decisions and lawmakers will occur that may affect the content of the textbook. Before submitting your answers try to make sure that your information is accurate. After you have submitted your first set of lessons, wait until they are returned before you submit your next work. This will enable you to gain a better understanding of course requirements and grading style. I will also be happy to offer suggestions that may be of help in later lessons.

Any questions regarding this course should be directed to either:

WKU On Demand (270 745-4158) or

Dr. Roger Murphy, Department of Political Science (270 745-2890)