

**POLITICAL SCIENCE 201**  
**INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POLITICS**

Fall Semester 2004  
Office Hours:  
MWF 1-2 (also by  
appointment)

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The Internet homepage for the ISU Political Science Department provides information about a wide variety of topics, including grad school/job opportunities and links to assist in doing research. Its address is: <web.indstate.edu/polisci>.

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This course is designed to be an introduction to American politics for college students, particularly those in the earlier stages of their university careers (i.e., frosh and sophomores). As such, its emphasis is more on breadth than depth, which means that we will cover a large number of topics--e.g., the nature of the U.S. Constitution, various forms of political participation, the structure and dynamics of various branches of the Federal government, and several key policy areas such as civil liberties, the economy, and perhaps even foreign affairs. Since there are *entire courses* devoted to many of these subjects in the Political Science Department and elsewhere in the University, it is obvious that we are only going to be able to scratch the surface in our explorations here.

A major concern in the course will be to look at various explanations of **WHY** things occur within the government and the larger political arena. In other words, we will be concerned not only with what has and is happening in the world of American politics, but also with the various forces within the government and/or in the larger society that **cause** these events to occur. It is when you begin to grapple with and to understand these "why questions" (technically known as cause/effect analysis) that you will be on the road to truly knowing what you are talking about when you discuss American politics.

We will, however, also be concerned with going beyond just understanding (in a cause/effect sense) how American politics works to making some value judgements about how it operates and what it produces. Here we will be interested in such controversies as: Is the U.S. electoral system unfairly loaded in favor of the major parties and incumbents?; Should legislators closely follow public

opinion in making their political decisions (e.g., deciding whether to convict Clinton on impeachment charges and remove him from office)?; Should the laws and the courts support Affirmative Action programs?; etc. It is within the process of making some of these value judgements that we should have some vigorous, interesting debates.

#### **REQUIRED TEXT:**

James Burns et. al., **Government By The People**, Brief Fifth Edition Paperback (Pearson Publishers, 2004)

#### **Supplemental Readings:**

In order to help you keep abreast of current developments in American politics, you should read one of the major national newspapers or national new magazines. With regard to newspapers, it is suggested that you look at the Sunday editions of either **The Washington Post** or **The New York Times** (I personally think that the Post is the better of the two). Both newspapers have special sections in their Sunday editions that deal with current events in general, including American politics. You should check these special sections carefully because the articles in them will normally include an explanation of events as well as a description of them. With regard to weekly news magazines, the most popular are **Time**, **Newsweek**, and **U.S. News and World Reports** (I personally think that U.S. News is the best of the lot, although there is not much difference between them).

Most of the above news sources and many others are available on the Internet--see the ISU Political Science Department homepage for links to these news pages.

Since I will try to use current events to illustrate some of the main points covered in the course and since we may at times move away from the "academic" course material in order to discuss current events, it is **crucial** that you do such supplemental reading to familiarize yourself with what is occurring in the world of American politics today. Moreover, I may very well include some **current events questions** on the **reading quizzes** that you will be taking. Thus self-interest demands that you do such reading. Simply watching television newscasts will not suffice; the information which they supply is quite sketchy and does not give you a sufficient background to begin to understand fully the complexity of the situations involved.

**Exams/Grades:**

Your overall grade for the course will be based on several exams as well as your class attendance record. A summary of the breakdown of these grade considerations is as follows:

- A. There will be several multiple choice quizzes (probably 4-5) based primarily on the assigned readings in the course textbook.

Your average grade for all these quizzes will account for 90 percent of your overall course grade.

- B. Class attendance account for 10 percent of your overall course grade in both of the above options.

If you miss no more than **THREE** of the scheduled classes without a valid (i.e., approved by the instructor) excuse, you will receive the full 10 percent credit for attendance. If you have a valid excuse for missing a class (i.e., you received prior approval from the instructor to miss the class or you can document a valid reason for missing a class), the excused absence will not be considered a missed class.

Each unexcused absence above the **Three-Miss Limit** will result in a deduction of 2 percent from the credit that you would otherwise receive for good class attendance.

Grading in this course will operate on a 100-point scale, with the grade breakdown being as follows:

90-100	A
85- 89	B+
80- 84	B
75- 79	C+
70- 74	C
65- 69	D+
60- 64	D
0- 59	F

In the case of a borderline average when all your grades for the course are computed, various non-graded considerations may be utilized to help determine whether you will receive a higher or a lower grade for the course. The three primary considerations here are: (1) attendance--if you miss more than 10-15 percent of the scheduled classes without a valid (i.e., approved by the instructor) excuse, it is extremely unlikely that a borderline grade will be raised to the next level; (2) participation in class discussions--quality participation will increase the likelihood

that a borderline grade will be raised to the next level; and (3) a pattern of significant improvement or decline in your grades over the course of the semester.

**Class attendance is a crucial issue!!** Beyond the 10 percent of the course grade allocated to attendance, past patterns clearly indicate that you simply **will not** be able to **do well** in this course **if you do not attend class** regularly.

## Course Outline and Reading Assignments

### I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

- A. Before Beginning: Some Guidelines And Basic Ideas For Understanding American Politics
- B. Surveying The American Landscape And Its Political Implications

Read: Chapter 4

### II. THE BACKGROUND AGAINST WHICH AMERICAN POLITICS IS PLAYED OUT

- A. Our Basic Values: American Political Culture And Ideology

Read: Chapter 3

- B. The Constitutional Framework

Read: Chapter 1

- C. The Federal System: Relations Between States And The National Government

Read: Chapter 2

### III. THE POLITICAL PROCESS OUTSIDE OF THE GOVERNMENT

- A. The Professionals At Work: Political Parties And Interest Groups

Read: Chapter 5

B. The People's Impact: Public Opinion, Voting, And Elections

Read: Chapter 6

C. The Mass Media: Watchdogs Or Lapdogs?

Read: Chapter 7

#### IV. THE INSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNMENT IN ACTION

A. Congress: Principled Legislators Or Private Interest Lackeys?

Read: Chapter 8

B. The White House And The Bureaucracy: Commanding The Troops Or Herding Cats??

Read: Chapters 9 and 11

C. Congressional/Executive Tensions: The Dueling Concepts Of The Imperial Presidency And Legislative Gridlock

Read: Chapter 10

D. The Supreme Court and the Judicial System: Bastions Of Justice Or Autocracy??

Read: Chapter 12

#### V. Where Political Passions Can Run Amok: Some Crucial And Often Highly Controversial Issue Areas

A. Managing The Economy And Public Welfare

Read: Chapter 15

B. The Clash Of Fundamental Values: Individual Rights And Equal Justice

Read: Chapters 13 and 14

C. America And The World: It Can Be A Risky, Dangerous

Place Out There

Read: Chapter 16