

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

Political Science 100
Fall 2006
T-Th 9:35-10:50 am

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TA's Office Hours: TBA

This course introduces students to the American political system. The primary focus is on the operation of our national government. Not only will we examine how the formal institutions of government work, such as the Congress, the Presidency, and the Supreme Court, but we will also consider the informal institutions, such as public opinion, political parties, and the mass media.

The textbook in the course presents a wealth of information. The lectures, in contrast, will often be argumentative, attempting to add flesh and bones to the "facts" presented in the text. I have assigned three additional books that will provide further stimulus for thinking about American politics. These books will also serve as the cornerstone to our debates, papers, and examinations.

Course requirements include one of two options. Option A: three examinations (45% of total grade), a final essay question on whether the US is a democracy (20%), and 3 short papers (35%). Option B: three examinations (45% of total grade), a final essay question on whether the US is a democracy (20%), 2 short papers (20%) and a participation in a debate (15%). The three tests will use some combination of long and short essays to assess your understanding of American politics. You will be expected not only to grasp the factual information, but also be able to craft cogent arguments about American politics. The papers will address pressing issues in American politics. You also have the option to do a debate on one of the three themes as opposed to a paper. I will say more about this requirement below.

The overall theme of this course concerns whether the United States qualifies as a democracy. With the recent outburst of nations trying to establish

democratic governments around the world, it is imperative that we address this critical issue. Our leaders often claim that America serves as a model for other countries as they struggle with the transition to democracy. But are such claims warranted? As you will see, the answer is far from clear. The final question of the course, worth 1/5th of your grade, will provide you a chance to wrestle with this issue explicitly.

This course will also approach this general theme in two additional ways. First, the short papers you write will speak indirectly to this general topic. Second, you have the option of engaging in a debate in front of the class about an important issue that has implications for whether the US is a democracy. I will give you a few days to decide which option is best for you. The papers will each be about 4-5 pages long (and no longer than 6 pages). The debate will take place in teams of 3-4 students. There will be a “pro” and a “con” team. You will each make your case to the class. The class will also pose questions, once you have debated. This option (B) could be a lot of fun, but not everyone wants to speak in front of the class. Hence, you can choose the 3 paper option (A). Once I see how much interest there is in the debates, then I will be able to see how best to proceed.

Books to Purchase:

- Fiorina and Peterson *The New American Democracy*, 3rd Edition
- Ellis *Founding Brothers*
- Frank, *What's a Matter with Kansas?*
- Price, *Congressional Experience*

Lecture Schedule and Reading Assignments

August 24th: Organizational Meeting

I. Origins and Foundations of the American Political System

August 29th to September 21st: Constitution, Civil Rights, Civil Liberties

Assigned Readings:

- Fiorina Chapters 1-4, 13, 14, Declaration of Independence,
Constitution, Federalist #10 and #51 (Appendices in Textbook)
- Ellis *Founding Brothers*, pp.3-205

Debate/Paper topic: “Agree or Disagree: The Founding Fathers were men of

character and not driven by political ambition.”

First Paper is due, September 26th

First Debate will be held on September 26th

First Examination, September 28th

II. Informal Political Institutions

October 3rd to November 2nd: Voting, Elections, Public Opinion, Mass Media

Assigned Reading:

Fiorina, chapters 5-8

Frank, entire book (Culture War)

Bartels essay (I will provide copies)

Debate/Paper topic “Agree or disagree: American Voters are Sensible and Informed Decision-Makers.”

Second Examination, November 7th - (sorry its election day, but can't be avoided)

Second Debate, November 2nd -

Second Paper, November 2nd

III. Formal Political Institutions

November 9th to December 5th: Congress, Presidency, Courts, and Bureaucracy

Assigned Reading:

Fiorina, Chapters 9-12

Price (whole book)

Debate/Paper Topic “Agree or disagree: Congress is a democratic institution.”

Third Debate will be held November 30th -

Third Paper is due November 30th

December 7th: Final Lecture: Is the US Democratic?

Final Exam scheduled by Vanderbilt