



Diablo Valley College – San Ramon Valley Campus
POLS-C1000-9487-9158: American Government & Politics / Fall 2026
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Instructor: John Kropf – Student Questions and Concerns: Tuesdays, 5:00 – 6:00 pm (Zoom)
Schedule: Tuesdays, SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE: 6:00 – 7:00 pm. August 25 – December 8, 2026

Course Description: This course is an introduction to government and politics in the United States and California. Students examine the constitutions, structure, and operation of governing institutions, civil liberties, and civil rights, political behaviors, political issues, and public policy using political science theory and methodology. We will survey of the American political framework and process. We will cover the Constitutional structure and functions of the legislative, executive and judicial branches at national, state and local levels, viewed in the context of political culture, political parties, pressure groups and citizenship. While exploring the numerous institutions and processes which make up our system of government, we will regularly inquire into four competing theories of how our government exists and operates.

Recommended: Eligibility for ENGL-122 or equivalent

Student Learning Outcomes: At the completion of this course, students will be able to...

1. Describe the basic structures and procedures of American government.
2. Analyze the role of culture, diversity and ideology in shaping public opinion and policy in the United States and California.
3. Contrast several analytical models of United States politics.
4. Identify and explain the three most common theories used to describe our system of government.
5. Locate themselves with some discernment and judgment among the assertions and choices in United States public life.
6. Develop a political outlook that does some justice to the complexity of the world and to the contributions of other thinkers.
7. Recognize the origin of political conflict in their own values and expectations
8. Describe the relative impact of federal, state, and local governments on the inhabitants of California.
9. Explain the civil liberties and civil rights of individuals as articulated in the U.S. Constitution and federal court decisions.
10. Analyze and *critically* evaluate some of the most important and contemporary issues we face in the 21st century based on 1-9 above.

Course Texts (required): Robert Heineman, *American Government* (2nd ed) **OR** the online textbook provided by instructor. Other assigned readings will be available on the website.

Course Methodology: Classes will consist primarily of class lectures and discussions, which will amplify and clarify text materials. Students will be expected to read assigned material prior to lectures/discussions.

Class Evaluation: Student progress will be evaluated primarily through written assignments, including a research paper and study questions and written video responses. Late work will be accepted on a case-by-case basis but will *definitely* lower your grade. Attendance is mandatory and will be taken formally at each session. Class participation is a part of your grade so you should make every effort to attend the weekly Zoom meetings. Homework will be primarily reading and answering study and discussion questions, which correspond to our discussions in class. Class participation is strongly encouraged. Student participation in class is an indicator of interest and shows that the student is keeping up with the assigned readings. Your final grade will break out over a normal “letter grade” percentage scale (i.e. 100-90% = “A”, 89-80% = “B”, etc...).

Study Questions Journals – 20%
First Draft Research Paper – 25%
Class Zoom Participation – 10%

Discussion Boards – 20%
Final Draft Research Paper – 25%

This course is under restricted AI use!

Students are NOT allowed to use advanced automated tools (artificial intelligence or machine learning tools such as ChatGPT, DALL-E, Grammarly, GitHub CoPilot, Perplexity, etc.) on assignments in this course. Each student is expected to complete each assignment without substantive assistance from others, including automated tools.

Important Dates: September 7, 2026 – Last day to drop class *without* a “W” appearing on your transcript.
November 13, 2026 – Last day to drop class *with* a “W” appearing on your transcript.
December 4, 2026 – Last day to request Pass / No Pass

*One final note: Dropping this class is YOUR responsibility. *DVC policy mandates that I cannot drop you from this class after November 13th through the final grading period.*

Political Science 121 / Introduction to American Government Outline

This schedule is tentative and can be adjusted to accommodate student / instructor interest

RH = Heineman text; WEB = Readings from class website

August 25: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *Politics in a Changing Society*. We should start this day with a broad overview of the nature of democracy and capitalism and discuss the relationship that exists between the two. Is it a “marriage made in heaven” as many textbooks would suggest? Within that framework, we’ll begin to look at several theories of American government which compete with the traditional democratic view, especially pluralism and elite theory, and discuss the legitimacy and viability of each. Other more cultural concepts will be introduced and debated such as the ideology of individualism and the notion of the American dream.

Video: *America’s Two-Party Duopoly*.

Reading for tonight: RH – Chapter 1

Readings for 9/1: RH – Chapter 5; WEB – Readings from the American Political Parties links.

September 1: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *American Political Parties*. Although not mentioned in the Constitution, political parties have become an important force in American politics today. We’ll begin with a brief look at how parties are organized in the U.S; the concept of “critical” elections and divided government, along with how the liberal/conservative dichotomy plays out in terms of party identification. However, a significant portion of our discussion will be devoted to analyzing third parties in the two-party system, especially the question of whether the structure of our system creates obstacles to third party electoral success. Would more of a multi-party construction bring more democracy to our government?

Video: *Alt-Right: Age of Rage*.

Readings for 9/8: RH – Chapter 2; WEB – Readings from the Founders / Constitution links.

September 8: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *The Founders and the Constitution*. In the next section, we’ll take a step back and look at some of the early documents (focusing on The Declaration and The Constitution) associated with American democracy. An important precedent will be to analyze some of the early thinkers (Hobbes and Locke prominently, but others too) and discuss what impact their philosophies had on the writing of these documents. We’ll also critically evaluate the motives of the founders by reviewing some later historical analysis by Beard on possible economic motivations for adopting the Constitution. In the end was it a legal, political, or economic document? Finally, a discussion of whether many contemporary problems might actually be *rooted* in the Constitution and what, if anything, should be done about it.

Video: *United States of Secrets*.

Readings for 9/15: RH – Chapter 3; WEB – Readings from the Federal System links.

September 15: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *The Federal System: Structure and Dynamics*. This will be a relatively brief examination of the differences between centralized and federal democracies and the advantages and disadvantages to both. Included will be a discussion of Cohen and Rogers’ thesis of “American Exceptionalism” and the six basic factors which contribute to this model. Does the principle of federalism make it difficult for people in the U.S. to politically organize themselves? Was it designed that way?

Video: *The Electoral College is Anti-Democracy*.

Readings for 9/22: RH – Chapter 8; WEB – Readings from The Congress links.

September 22: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *The Congress: Institutions and Processes.* We are now going to begin the process of analyzing the different branches of government, starting with the legislative branch, the location of the Senate and House of Representatives. Some of the concepts we'll examine will be the effect of party affiliation and discipline, leadership roles, the importance of committees, the various sources of legislation, and the various powers of the legislative branch. In addition to this more institutional approach, we'll ask some critical questions about how well this branch of government conforms to traditional democratic theories. Does "the people's branch" really serve the people? If not, who do they serve?

Video: *Pricele\$\$*.

Readings for 9/29: RH – Chapter 9; WEB – Readings from The Executive Branch links.

September 29: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *The Executive Branch.* The next branch of government to be examined is the executive, the office and bureaucracy of the president. We'll discuss some of the more important roles of the president as outlined in the Constitution. We will also examine the concept of the "bully pulpit" and maybe have a discussion related to how effective it has been historically and in the contemporary period. Some of the other concepts examined will be the problem of "groupthink" and the power of the executive vis-à-vis the other two branches. Looking at Miroff and Genovese's theories will help us to answer whether the executive speaks for "the people," or whether the structure of our political economy imposes limitations on what the president can do.

Video: *The Corporate Coup d'Etat*.

Readings for 10/6: RH – Chapter 11; WEB – Readings from The Federal Judiciary links.

October 6: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *The Federal Judiciary.* The last branch to be analyzed will be the judicial branch, with extra emphasis on the Supreme Court. We'll begin by discussing one fundamental concept – judicial review – and ask why Americans have largely ignored this unusual usurpation of power by one branch. We'll look at the various types of opinions given by the court, different types of law, and the principles of judicial activism and restraint. An important contemporary issue to discuss and debate will be the USA PATRIOT ACT, why and how it came into being and the different perspectives on its constitutionality.

Video: *Supreme Revenge: The Battle for the Court*.

Readings for 10/13: RH – Chapter 10; WEB – Readings from Governmental Bureaucracy links.

October 13: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *Governmental Bureaucracy.* One can postulate that no discussion of American government is complete without an examination of the bureaucracies that are part and parcel to it. A fourth theory of American government – "hyperpluralism" – will be a big part of our analysis as we look at the bureaucracy. We'll look at other aspects too from the principles of hierarchy and formal rules to problems of "policy triangles" and "agency capture." Has the expanding role of government in the 20th been good or bad for democracy in the U.S.?

Video: *David Graeber About Bullshit Jobs*.

Readings for 10/20: RH – Chapter 4; WEB – Readings from the Public Opinion and Mass Media links.

October 20: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *Public Opinion and the Mass Media.* Sometimes called the "fourth branch" of government, the mass media in the U.S. will constitute a significant part of our discussion of American democracy. What is "public opinion" and where and how does it develop? Does the existence of the First Amendment of the Constitution really mean that the press is "free"? Rounding out our discussion of such traditional concepts as "agenda setting" and the "priming effect," will be the introduction of a very provocative thesis on how the mass media operate put forth by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in the 1980's. Called the "propaganda model" of the news, it has stirred a vibrant debate about the true nature and role that the mass media play in this country and increasingly, around the world.

Video: *Project Censored: The Movie*.

Readings for 10/27: RH – Chapter 6; WEB – Reading from the Voting and Election links.

October 27: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *Voting and Elections.* Does the United States have low voter turnout when compared with other democracies? If so, why is that the case? These are two important questions we'll be examining in this section of the American electoral process. Here we will ask some critical questions about the structure of single-member district pluralities. Would the more widespread practice of "proportional representation" improve the system – make it more democratic? Would adopting the practice of instant runoff voting (IRV) eliminate the "spoiler" problem in American elections?

Video: *Suppressed and Sabotaged: The Fight to Vote*.

Readings for 11/4: RH – Chapter 7; WEB – Readings from the Political Interest Groups links.

November 4: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *Political Interest Groups*. These various groupings form the core of what political scientists call the “engaged” public. What are they and why did Madison fear they were “dangerous to a healthy republic”? We’ll concentrate on some of the more important thinkers who examine these groups primarily under the philosophical underpinnings of pluralism. We’ll also examine the concepts of group legitimacy, access and influence, economic, single-issue and public interest groups, and the proverbial “free rider” problem. We’ll then profile an important group in the news – the neoconservatives and their “Project for a New American Century.”

Video: *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Politics*.

Readings for 11/17: RH – Chapter 12; WEB – Readings from the Public Policy links.

*******Research Paper Due Tonight! (November 17, 2026)*******

November 17: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *The Public Policy Process*. From this point we are going to “switch gears” so to speak and begin an examination of how *policy* is made in the United States. We’ll begin with some basics: what is policy and what are the major types; who are the primary actors influencing policy, and what are the different models used by political scientists to describe how policy is actually made; and what are “tradeoffs” and “unintended consequences” of policymaking? As a project for this section, we’ll critically examine the phenomenon of the expanding debt in the US government and discuss what policies should be adopted in order to deal with the possible consequences.

Video: *Requiem for the American Dream*.

Readings for 11/24: RH – Chapter 13; WEB – Readings from the Economic Policy links.

November 24: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *Economic Policy*. Maybe the most important type of policymaking revolves around economic questions. We’ll look at the four major types of economic policy debated in the U.S. along with some of the more important bureaucracies that draw up those policies. We’ll settle the debate about the budgetary process and whether military spending, entitlement payments to individuals, or paying off interest on the national debt is in our best interests.

Video: *Crash: The Power of the Fed*.

Readings for 12/1: RH – Chapter 15; WEB – Readings from the United States Foreign Policy links.

December 1: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *United States Foreign Policy*. Being a global superpower has meant that our choices on foreign policy issues have global consequences. Of the purported goals of U.S. foreign policy (national security, free and open trade, world peace, democracy, and concern for humanity), how do we tease apart the priorities when it comes to formulating policy? When it comes to our national interest, is it better for us to approach the world as idealists or realists? How do we even define our national interest? Along with these very important questions, we’ll also examine some basic concepts such as deterrence and massive retaliation, arms control, containment strategies, trade, proliferation of WMDs, and immigration. Finally, we’ll analyze U.S. foreign policy in the context of 9-11 and ask some critical questions about foreign policy in the age of terrorism.

Video: *Why We Fight*.

Readings for 12/8: RH – Chapter 14; WEB – Readings from Civil Liberties / Civil Rights links.

December 8: LECTURE / DISCUSSION: *Civil Liberties and Civil Rights*. As a policy issue, nothing tops a discussion of “rights” in a constitutional democracy. From the drug war to gay marriage to affirmative action, the question of how best to protect people’s liberties under the Bill of Rights is continually evolving. In addition to looking at these issues and more, we’ll examine various concepts such as due process and the writ of habeas corpus; the “establishment” clause and clear and present danger tests; the “fighting words” doctrine and prior restraint.

Video: *Broken on All Sides: Race, Mass Incarceration, & New Visions for Criminal Justice in the U.S.*

*******Final Draft of Research Project Due Tonight! (December 8, 2026)*******

December 8: FINAL EXAMINATION: Good luck to all! Have a great winter break and spring semester!

Final Considerations for the Course

1. Sensitive Subjects Warning

Due to the sensitive and controversial nature of the topics discussed in this course, the possibility of being triggered or emotionally challenged is a likelihood for some. This is because these issues may be very real in our everyday lives. For others, the information in this course may be new to them and may also prove to be upsetting. Still others may be upset due to feelings of guilt or shame for not having known or understood how things have been working in our government and society. Of course, all these feelings are okay. It's how we handle them that matters. Hopefully, we can challenge ourselves to pay attention to our emotions, considering what is upsetting us, listen to and respect one another, and share this honestly with the class (or with me in private if you prefer). This is how authentic learning takes place.

2. Inclusivity

Every student in this classroom, regardless of personal history or identity categories, is a member of this group. Your experiences are important, and you should share them as they become relevant to our class. No student in this class is ever expected or believed to speak for all members of their group(s).

In this class, you have the right to determine your own identity. You have the right to be called by whatever name you wish. You have the right to be referred to by whatever pronouns you wish. You have the right to adjust those things at any point in your education.

If you find that there are aspects of course instruction, subject matter, or class environment that result in barriers to your inclusion, please contact me privately without fear of reprisal.

3. Respectful Dialogue

“Everyone thinks; it is our nature to do so. But much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, or downright prejudiced. Yet the quality of our life and that of what we produce, make, or build depends on the quality of our thought. Shoddy thinking is costly, both in money and in quality of life. Excellence in thought, however, must be systematically cultivated.”

- Linda Elder and Richard Paul, *Critical Thinking: Teaching Students to Study and Learn*

In this class, I would like us to cultivate “excellence in thought” by creating a learning environment that supports a diversity of thoughts, perspectives, and experiences, and that honors all our identities (including race, gender, class, veteran status, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.). With this in mind, let's discuss what we all need in order to slow down, recognize our own positions (including unexamined biases), and take another look at someone's ideas, experiences, or values. How can we listen to and hear different opinions, even if we don't accept them or understand them, with an open heart and mind? In this class, let's practice these skills together.

4. On Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is the foundation of higher education and critical inquiry. In this course, academic freedom protects the right of the instructors to design the curriculum, select course materials, and facilitate discussion of issues relevant to the field, including topics related to social inequality, power, and justice. It also protects the right of students to engage thoughtfully with course content, ask questions, and express ideas grounded in academic evidence and respectful dialogue.