



Diablo Valley College – San Ramon Valley Campus
POLSC 121 – 9487-9158 / Introduction to American Government / Fall 2024
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Instructor: John Kropf – Office Hours: Tuesdays, 5:00 – 6:00 pm (Zoom)

Schedule: Tuesdays, SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE: 6:00 – 7:00 pm. August 27 – December 10, 2024

Course Description: This semester we will examine various historical, philosophical, and legal aspects of our government, to gain a deeper understanding of what our role and position will be in a rapidly changing world. The course is a 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. Emphasis will be placed on the impact of federal, state, and local governments in California. 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%

Discussion Boards – 20%

First Draft Research Paper – 25%

Final Draft Research Paper – 25%

Class Zoom Participation – 10%

Important Dates: September 8, 2024 – Last day to drop class *without* a “W” appearing on your transcript.
November 15, 2024 – Last day to drop class *with* a “W” appearing on your transcript.
December 6, 2024 – 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 15th 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 27: 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 9/3: RH – Chapter 5; WEB – Readings from the American Political Parties links.

September 3: 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 9/10: RH – Chapter 2; WEB – Readings from the Founders / Constitution links.

September 10: 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 9/17: RH – Chapter 3; WEB – Readings from the Federal System links.

September 17: 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 9/24: RH – Chapter 8; WEB – Readings from The Congress links.

September 24: 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 institutionalized 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: *Money, Power, and Wall Street*.

Readings for 10/1: RH – Chapter 9; WEB – Readings from The Executive Branch links.

October 1: 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 10/8: RH – Chapter 11; WEB – Readings from The Federal Judiciary links.

October 8: 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 10/15: RH – Chapter 10; WEB – Readings from Governmental Bureaucracy links.

October 15: 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 10/22: RH – Chapter 4; WEB – Readings from the Public Opinion and Mass Media links.

October 22: 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 10/29: RH – Chapter 6; WEB – Reading from the Voting and Election links.

October 29: 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? These and other questions will be discussed and debated in this section.

Video: *Whose Vote Counts, Explained*.

Readings for 11/5: RH – Chapter 7; WEB – Readings from the Political Interest Groups links.

November 5: 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 11/12: RH – Chapter 12; WEB – Readings from the Public Policy links.

November 12: 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 11/19: RH – Chapter 13; WEB – Readings from the Economic Policy links.

*******Research Paper Due Tonight! (November 19, 2024)*******

November 19: 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 11/26: RH – Chapter 15; WEB – Readings from the United States Foreign Policy links.

November 26: 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 12/3: RH – Chapter 14; WEB – Readings from Civil Liberties / Civil Rights links.

December 3: 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.*

December 10: FINAL EXAMINATION: Good luck to all! Have a great winter break and spring semester!

*******Final Draft of Research Project Due Tonight! (December 10, 2024)*******