Political Science 202: Introduction to American Politics

University of Washington  Spring 2015
Lectures MWF at 11:30 in Smith 120  Sections at various times

Professor Mark Smith  
Office: Gowen 29; Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, 1:30-2:30 and by appointment  
e-mail: masmith@u.washington.edu

The course web site is located at: courses.washington.edu/smithint/amgov.html

Overview of Class:
This course will provide an introduction to the players and institutions of American politics. We will examine the behavior of both governmental officials—elected and unelected—and extra-governmental actors such as the news media, interest groups, and political parties. Because this is a survey course, we will aim for breadth rather than depth. Among the questions considered are why the U.S. has only two major parties; why Congress tends to move slowly; how the electoral College works; why bureaucratic agencies use lots of formal rules; why the mass media cover certain stories and not others; and how polls attempt to measure public opinion. For most of these topics, what we cover would serve as a useful gateway to more specialized courses that address them in greater detail.

Required Readings:
A collection of articles and essays.

Course Requirements:
The grading is based on two midterm exams, a final exam, a paper, and participation in sections. The final exam will cover the entire quarter. All exams will cover material from the lectures and assigned readings.

Grading:
First exam: 17.5%  
Second exam: 17.5%  
Final exam: 25%  
Paper: 25%  
Section participation: 15%

The first exam will be given in class on April 17 and the second exam on May 15. The final exam will be given on Wednesday, June 10 from 2:30-4:20. The paper will be due on May 7.
Class Schedule
(lectures in bold, sections in italics)

Part I. Political Science as a Science

March 30  Introduction to the course.

March 31  Sections: Read Hans Noel, “Ten Things Political Scientists Know That You Don’t”

April 1  What is political science, and where does the study of American politics fit within it?


Part II. From the Founding to the Present

April 3  How the meaning of the terms “liberal” and “conservative” have evolved.

April 6  Changing beliefs, institutions, and practices related to majority rule.

April 7  Sections: Read James Madison, The Federalist #10; and excerpts from The Federalist #63 (James Madison) and The Federalist #68 and #71 (Alexander Hamilton).

April 8  Does America have majority rule today?

April 9  Sections: Read Jeffrey Toobin, “Our Broken Constitution”

April 10  How the meaning of the Bill of Rights expanded over time.

April 13  The development of judicial review.

April 14  Sections: Read Steven M. Teles, “Kludgeocracy in America”

April 15  The development of the Electoral College and the presidential selection system.

April 16  Sections: Read Gil Troy, “The Campaign Triumphant”; and Kenneth Goldstein, Matthew Dallek, and Joel Rivlin, “Even the Geeks are Polarized: The Dispute over the ‘Real Driver’ in American Elections”

April 17  First exam.
Part III. American Exceptionalism

April 20  The contours of American exceptionalism: American policies, values, and institutions.

April 21  Sections: Read Andrew Ross Sorkin and Megan Thee-Brenan, “Many Feel the American Dream is Out of Reach, Poll Shows”; Matthew O’Brian, “Why is the American Dream Dead in the South?”; and “Minding the Nurture Gap”

April 22  The causes of American exceptionalism.

April 23  Sections: Read Andrew L. Roberts, “What Americanists Don’t Know about American Politics”

April 24  Conclusions on American exceptionalism.

Part IV. American Political Institutions

April 27  Why Supreme Court justices make the decisions they do. Paper assigned.

April 28  Sections: Read Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Shifting Boundaries: The Establishment Clause and Government Funding of Religious Schools and Other Faith-Based Organizations”

April 29  Explaining decisions on the Supreme Court.

April 30  Sections: Read Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “A Fluid Boundary: The Free Exercise Clause and the Legislative and Executive Branches.” Also, read about the controversy over Indiana’s recent religious freedom law (just Google “Indiana religious freedom law” and you’ll get plenty of material.)

May 1  Why Americans like their own members of Congress much more than Congress as a whole.

May 4  Presidential powers.

May 5  Sections: Read Kenneth S. Lowande and Sidney Milkis, “‘We Can’t Wait’: Barack Obama, Partisan Polarization, and the Administrative Presidency”

May 6  Presidential leadership.

May 7  Sections: Read R. Shep Melnick, “The Gridlock Illusion” and Pietro Nivola,
“Partisanship in Perspective.”  PAPER DUE.

May 8  The causes of red tape.

Part V. Campaigns, the Media, and the Public

May 11  The news media: How journalists determine what qualifies as news.

May 12  Sections: Read Paul Starr, “Goodbye to the Age of Newspapers (Hello to a New Era of Corruption)”

May 13  The news media: How journalists cover politics and elections.


May 15  Second exam.

May 18  The two-party system in America.

May 19  Sections: Read Jonathan Rauch, “Rescuing Compromise”; Ezra Klein, “The Single Most Important Fact about American Politics”

May 20  Interpreting public opinion polls.

May 21  Sections: Public opinion. Read Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends.”

May 22  Presidential campaign ads.

May 25  No class (Memorial Day)


May 27  The competence of the American electorate.


May 29  Initiatives and referenda.

June 1  The political development of the American health care system
June 2  Sections:  Read Gary Andres, “Campaign-Style Advocacy: A Broader View of Lobbying”; and Melinda Burns, “K Street and the Status Quo”

June 3  Money in elections.

June 4  Sections:  Scan the websites of Family Research Council, Natural Resources Defense Council, Freedom Works, Center for American Progress, AFL-CIO, and United States Chamber of Commerce

June 5  Do campaign contributors buy influence in Congress?

Wednesday, June 10  Final Exam from 2:30-4:30