Course Description:

This course is an introduction to American politics and government. By the end of the semester you should have a good understanding of how the government makes policy and why decisions are made as they are. The course will combine accounts of how "Washington really works" from the popular media, scholarly work on the governmental process, and debates on various political issues and institutions. This is an especially exciting time to be taking a class on American politics, with the approaching presidential election, continuing debates over Social Security and Medicare, energy and global warming, immigration, gun control, how to deal with the budget deficits, and growing concerns about polarization and gridlock in Washington.

The course begins with a discussion of the foundations of our governmental system: the Constitution, federalism, capitalism and questions concerning the democratic nature of our government. Then we will examine the American political institutions: Congress, the president, the bureaucracy, and the courts. From there we turn to political participation and examine public opinion, parties, campaigns and elections, the media, and interest groups. Finally, we will see how it all fits together by examining civil rights, social policy, economic policy, and foreign policy. While the course is a lecture class (intimate discussions are a little difficult with nearly 250 students), I encourage you to raise questions you have about anything presented in the lectures.

Course Evaluation:

The grades for the course will be based on two midterms (27.5% each), attendance and participation in discussion section (10%), and a final exam (35%). The midterm exams will be a combination of multiple choice and short IDs and the final exam will be a combination of multiple choice, short IDs, and one long essay. The multiple choice and short essay portions of the final exam will not be comprehensive and only cover material since the second midterm; the long essay, which I will give you in advance, is comprehensive in nature. All reading material and lectures will be fair game on the exams.

Books and Readings:

The following books are required for the course and are available for purchase at the University of Wisconsin Bookstore on State Street. The books are shrink-wrapped together as a packaged deal.


A few additional required readings are on posted on Moodle, which you can access through your Student Center on MyUW. Also, I urge you to read a good national newspaper, such as the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, or the Washington Post. The national news weeklies, such as Newsweek or Time also would be useful for keeping you current on what is happening in the world of politics. I will make available to you on the first day of class order forms for the New York Times. Home delivery (to your dorm or apartment) of the Times is available at a reduced rate.

A friendly word of advice on the readings that should be taken seriously: you should complete the assigned reading before the topic is discussed in lecture. At a minimum you should complete the reading before your discussion section or you will not be prepared to participate. Also, many of the lectures will use the readings as a point of departure, so your understanding of lecture material will be enhanced by having completed and understood the assigned reading. The reading load averages about 85 pages a week. This should not be a difficult pace to maintain if you do not fall behind. If you put off reading anything until before the exams you will find yourself staring at 425 pages for each of the exams . . . this strategy is not recommended. One other thing I should mention – the reading load is not equally distributed across the weeks. Some weeks you will only have 30-40 pages of reading; other weeks will be more than 100. Therefore, it may be useful for you to try to get ahead on the next week's readings when the reading load for a given week is relatively light.

Web Sites
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The Moodle site for the course also includes chapter reviews, study questions, on-line quizzes, links to other political sites, political blogs, vocabulary flash cards, plus other readings and resources. My homepage is https://faculty.polisci.wisc.edu/dtcanon/ and includes links to other political sites and information about the course. Outlines of the powerpoint presentations will be posted before each lecture on Moodle.

Lecture Schedule, Reading Assignments, and Discussion Questions:
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The following abbreviations are used in the outline of assigned reading for each day: “TED” for The Enduring Debate and “APT” for American Politics Today. There are a few on-line readings that will be available on Moodle.

I. FOUNDATIONS

A. Introduction to the Course – September 6
   Preface and Chapter 1 in APT, xxi-xxiv, 3-24.

B. The Constitution – September 8
   Chapter 2 in APT, 29-63.

Discussion Section Questions, September 6-13 (Discussion sections will meet starting after lecture on the 6th): What are the three themes of the textbook? Can you think of examples from your life that illustrate the idea that “politics is everywhere?” Why is government necessary? Do you think conflict in politics is a good thing or bad thing? Why? What were the central problems the Founders faced at the Constitutional
convention and how did they resolve them? What are some of the unresolved constitutional problems? What is distinctive about the American constitutional system? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a strong central government? What explains the simplicity and durability of the Constitution? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the document’s simplicity? How did the Founding Fathers' view of people help shape the Constitution? What does Madison say about the relation between self-interest and the nature of government in Federalist #10? What is the proposed solution in Federalist #51?

The Constitution, continued – September 13
Eric Lane, Michael Oreskes, and Sanford Levinson, “Should the Constitution Be Fundamentally Changed?”, in TED, 73-97.

C. Federalism – September 15
Chapter 3 in APT, 67-103.

Discussion Section Questions, September 13-September 20: What is the “liberal tradition” in America and how did it affect the founding era? What is Charles Beard’s “economic interpretation of the Constitution”? To what extent do the ideas he talks about still shape our government today? Do you think it is good to regularly amend the Constitution to reflect changing values and address current problems, or should the Constitution be changed only rarely? When should the national government have the power to coerce states to adopt national policies against their will, if ever? How has the balance of power between the states and the national government evolved over time? How are the states fighting back to resist centralization at the national level? What role has the Supreme Court played in this evolution (as in the medical marijuana and assisted suicide cases)? Do you think the Supreme Court should have intervened in either of these cases, or left those decisions up to the states? Which level of government should play the primary role in immigration policy? What if the national government does not enforce its own laws? Should the states be able to step in to fill the void? How has the Supreme Court addressed this issue?

D. Civil Liberties – September 20-22
Chapter 4 in APT, 105-149.

Discussion Section Questions for September 20-27: Should the Bill of Rights apply to the states as well as the federal government? Why? Should hate speech be allowed? Do you agree with Rauch’s assessment of the problems associated with trying to limit hate speech? If so, is all speech protected by the Constitution? If not, where do you draw the line between protected free speech and speech or actions that may be harmful to others? What about defendants’ rights, protections against illegal searches and seizures (as discussed in lecture and in the textbook)? What is the nature of the tradeoff between privacy and national security? So the data collection efforts by the U.S. government concern you, or are they necessary to protect us?
E. Democracy in the United States – September 27-29

Democracy and Participation – September 23
Howard Zinn and Sidney Hook on "Democracy: How Democratic is America?"; on Moodle.

Democracy and Capitalism – September 25

Discussion Section Questions, September 27-October 4: How democratic is America? Are Zinn's or Hook's arguments more compelling? What are the central areas of their disagreements? How can their arguments be related to the state of American democracy today? Is capitalism consistent with (or indeed reinforce) democracy, or does it serve as a 'prison' for policy makers? Does the recent economic crisis tend to support Lindblom or Friedman? How powerful is the political elite in the United States? What is the proper role for the federal government in terms of controlling the market? How does the tradeoff between freedom and power relate to the debate about the relationship between capitalism and democracy? In what areas should government use its power?

II. POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

A. Congress – October 4-6
Chapter 11 in APT, 387-433.
Cato, Brian Friel, and Jonathan Rauch, “Pork Barrel Politics,” TED, 199-211.

Discussion Section Questions for October 4-11: Is Congress truly the "first branch" of government? What aspects of its operation either justify or undermine that label? Do the justifications for the bicameral legislature presented by the Founders still ring true today, or would we be better off with a unicameral legislature? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the strong reelection goal among members of Congress? How does the "home style" adopted by a member of Congress help in this quest for reelection? What are the types of things that members do that influence their home style? Why do Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that having a responsive Congress is "too much of a good thing?" Do you agree? Would term limits help solve the problem of an over-responsive Congress? Is “pork barrel” politics evidence that Congress is not working properly, or evidence that we are getting the type of representation that we want? What are the contrasting views of "pork" presented by the authors? How is the debate over pork related to the roles of delegate or trustee?

*********** First In-Class Midterm Exam on Tuesday, October 11th ***********
(exam will cover readings and lectures through October 6th)

A. The Courts – October 13
Chapter 14 in APT, 509-51.
Alexander Hamilton, Federalist 78, TED, 273-79.
Antonin Scalia and Stephen Breyer, “Interpreting the Constitution: Originalism or a Living Constitution?”
TED, 293-314.

Discussion Section Questions for October 11-18: Are the federal courts the "least dangerous branch?" What is
the proper role of the Supreme Court in the American political process? Should they be responsive to political
forces, as O’Brien discusses? What is the meaning of "judicial restraint" and "judicial activism"? Are they
related to "strict constructionism"? Which approach to interpreting the Constitution, Scalia’s textualism or
Breyer’s consequentialist approach, do you find more appealing? What role should the Senate play in the
appointment and confirmation of judges? Can the Supreme Court be an agent of social change?

C. The Presidency – October 18-20
Chapter 12 in APT, 435-71.
Adam Clymer, Tim Cavanaugh, and Akhil Reed Amar, “Prospects, Possibilities, and Perils in Obama’s
Second Term,” TED, 229-38.

Discussion Section Questions for October 18-25: Neustadt argues that the president’s central power is the
“power to persuade.” Do you agree? Has the president become too powerful? What would the Founding
Fathers say about the current state of the presidency? How are the president’s powers limited by our system of
separated powers? Have these limits on presidential power changed during war time? What are the different
constraints and opportunities faced by Obama in his second term? Which of the three authors comes closest to
how you view the likely outcome of his second term? What would Neustadt and Jones say about Obama’s
second term?

C. The Bureaucracy – October 25
Chapter 13 in APT, 473-507.
Wedel and Cato on “Privatization,” TED, 257-72.

III. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A. Public Opinion – October 27
Chapters 6 in APT, 199-235.
George Gallup, “Polling the Public,” TED, 317-324.

Discussion Section Questions for October 25-November 1: Does the bureaucracy serve the public interest?
What is the proper standard for assessing the bureaucracy? Efficiency? Equity? How does this play out in the
comparison of the DMV and McDonalds presented by Wilson? What are the advantages and disadvantages of
contracting out some government programs to the private sector (“privatization”)? How does the debate over
privatizing government programs fit into Wilson’s discussion? As discussed in lecture, what are the
differences between “police patrol” and “fire alarm” oversight, and which do you think would be the
preferable form of oversight? To what extent should political leaders listen to public opinion? What are some
of the problems associated with interpreting the results of public opinion polls? How can question wording
shape the results of polls? How did question wording influence the interpretation of President Clinton’s
impeachment? Can you think of other examples how question wording influences the outcome of polls?

B. Campaigns and Elections – November 1-3

Chapter 9 in APT, 305-349.
William Galston, “Telling Americans to Vote, Or Else,” TED, 373-76

Discussion Section Questions for November 1-8: How do voters decide who to vote for? What does this view of voting behavior say about how we should interpret the results of elections? Do elections “send a message” or can we really tell much about what voters want from the outcome of elections? Which of the three theories of voting reviewed by Menand sounds the most convincing? Do you think that Americans should be required to vote? What are the advantages and disadvantages of compulsory voting? What are the implications of requiring identification for voters? Do you support this policy?

D. Political Parties – November 8

Chapter 8 in APT, 269-303.

E. Interest Groups – November 10

Chapter 10 in APT, 351-385.
Alexis de Tocqueville, “Political Association in the United States,” TED, 440-43.

Discussion Section Questions for November 8-15: What are the major differences between the Democratic and Republican parties? Would our political system benefit from stronger parties? What would are the advantages and disadvantages of stronger parties? What does Rae mean by “be careful what you wish for”? Is the Tea Party movement a good thing for American politics or is it contributing to further polarization? Is “red and blue America” a myth? What are the various strategies used by interest groups to influence politics (as described in the textbook). Which do you think is likely to be more effective? Which of these tactics are appropriate and which should be regulated? What are some of the advantages of political association and organization described by Truman? Do interest groups reflect the collective interests of the nation? What are the implications of Olson’s collective action problem for the representativeness of interest groups? Do all groups have their voices heard through the political process, as the pluralists such as Truman would maintain, or are some groups unrepresented because of the logic of collective action? How can collective action problems be solved? What are the implications of the Citizen United decision on the impact of interest groups in elections?

******** Second In-Class Midterm Exam on Tuesday, November 15th ********
(exam will cover readings and lectures through November 10th)

C. The Media – November 17

Chapter 7 in APT, 237-267.

Discussion Section Questions for November 15-22: How as the “new media” changed coverage of politics? Is this good or bad for the political system? How have the media changed governing? Do you think they play too much of a role in politics? If so, how could this be changed? What is the impact of media choice on political knowledge and turnout? What are the implications for politics? What is the future of political journalism? Can political news “be saved?”

IV. Public Policy

A. Foreign Policy– November 22
   Chapter 17 in APT, 635-771.
   Peter Sutherland, “Reality Check,” TED, 562-69.
   Zenko, Cohen and Miller, “Is the World Still a Dangerous Place?” TED, 570-88.

Discussion Section Questions November 22-29: What is the proper role of the United States in the international community? Is economic and political globalization out of sync? Does economic globalization pose challenges to the United States more generally? How do Soros and Sutherland differ in their interpretations of the impact of globalization on poor countries? Which argument do you find more convincing? How serious a threat is global terror? Do politicians use the threat of terror for their own political ends, is the focus on fighting terrorism a necessary part of modern politics?

*** Thanksgiving Break, November 24 - 27 ***

B. Civil Rights – November 29 – December 1
   Chapter 5 APT, 151-197.
   Liu, Warshawsky, and Elazar “What Does it Mean to be American?” TED, 27-52.
   The Economist, “Race and University Admissions,” June 28, 2016, on Moodle.
   John Paul Schnapper-Casteras, “Moving forward from Fisher II,” June 24, 2016, SCOTUS blog, on Moodle.

Discussion Section Questions for November 29-December 6: What is the best means of achieving an integrated society? Describe the progress made in the area of civil rights in the past 50 years. What remains to be done? Lincoln and King take opposing views about the place of civil disobedience in trying to promote social change. Which do you find more convincing? If you think that civil disobedience can be appropriate, how does one decide where to draw the line between legitimate civil disobedience and lawless behavior? Which of the authors makes a more convincing case concerning what it means to be an American? What are the implications of this debate for immigration policy in the United States? Which arguments do you find more convincing in the Supreme Court case about affirmative action, Fisher v. University of Texas? Those that argue that affirmative action is unconstitutional and should be struck down, or those that argue for importance of diversity in higher education?

C. Social Policy – December 6-8
   Chapter 16 in APT, 595-633.

Discussion Section Questions December 6-13: What different techniques does the federal government use to achieve its social policy goals? What should be done to reform Social Security, if anything? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the various proposals? Does the recent volatility in the stock market and the meltdown of the subprime mortgage market change your views (if you support some type of privatization)? What are the types of policy outlined by Lowi? How does the nature of the type of policy influence the nature of politics associated with that issue? What role should the government play in providing health care, if any? Should market forces play more of a role in health care? Is Obamacare a reasonable middle ground between a national health care plan and a market-oriented system, or it just making things worse, as its critics claim?

D. Economic Policy and Summing it Up – December 13-15
Chapter 15 in APT, 553-593.
Herbert Hoover, “Against the Proposed New Deal,” TED, 490-94.
Jon Gertner, “The Rise and Fall of the GDP,” TED, 495-504.
Noah and Epstein, “Is Income Inequality a Problem?” TED, 505-18.

Discussion Section Questions December 13-15: To what extent should the federal government have responsibility for making sure that the economy is running smoothly? Is the government responsible for providing a “social safety net,” as argued by Roosevelt? Or should the market be allowed to operate freely without as much government regulation or intervention, as argued by Hoover? What are the implications of the debate over how to measure GDP for economic policy? How might economic policy differ if we valued “low GDP man” over “high GDP man”? Is economic inequality a central problem that should be addressed through economic policy?

*** FINAL EXAM, Thursday, December 22nd, 7:45-9:45 a.m., Location TBA ***