Introduction to American National Government

1. Course Description
This course offers an introduction to the major institutions, participants, and processes in American politics. The focus is on how the structure of our political system conditions the practice of politics at the national level -- the ongoing struggles among competing groups and individuals for influence over government activities and public policy. We will examine the principles underlying the constitutional framework of American government, and analyze the three branches (Congress, the Judiciary, and the Executive) while trying to understand the advantages and problems inherent in a system of "checks and balances." We will also consider important extra-governmental actors, such as political parties, interest groups, and the media. In the final part of the course, we will look into important issues of public policy, and focus on economic, budget, and social welfare policies.

My goals in this class are (1) to show you that politics can be interesting – even fascinating, (2) give you the skills to become informed consumers of political information, and (3) introduce you to the ways that political scientists see the world.

My position is that there is no such thing as a boring time to study politics, and every year presents important controversies and challenges. We are nine months unto the most unusual presidency in modern American history, itself the result of the most unusual presidential election in modern American history, with a result that virtually nobody saw coming. While it is a truism that Trump sees himself as a "disruptor," that appellation does not quite capture the chaos of an administration that has blown through many of the norms that have long been considered central to the governing processes. To the president's supporters, dismissing those norms is not a bug, but a feature. But democratic norms are essential to the operation of stable government (we will investigate why this is the case). With Trump we are in many respects in uncharted territory.

And whatever you think of Donald Trump – a welcome overthrower of a corrupt political establishment or a clear and present danger to the Republic – the problems we face are not going to remain static, nor will rest of the world sit back and wait for the U.S. to figure all of this out. Terrorism, nuclear threats, North Korea, ISIS, climate change, income inequality, Russia, China, health care, taxes, immigration, the social safety net, technological change, criminal justice reform, the future of Social Security, the national debt, and on and on, these things have not gone away. Even under "normal" times, these would be challenging problems. In a highly polarized climate in which Democrats and Republicans seem to loathe each other and "compromise" is a dirty word, it is even harder.

The particulars of these political disputes might appear to be unique and new, but they are not. Rather, they reflect the same deep tensions about the role of government, conflicts over values, the nature of the social contract, and how the costs and benefits of government action that are distributed, that have shaped American politics since the beginning of the Republic. Our task this semester is to sort this out, or, if that's not possible, at least to identify a
framework and vocabulary for analyzing and putting into context contemporary events.

II. Course Readings
You should purchase the following books, which are available at the University bookstore in a discounted package (though you’re free to buy them elsewhere if you can get a better deal). Make sure you have the correct edition and version:


I will identify textbook readings by chapter. Readings in The Enduring Debate are assigned by number.

I will place additional readings on Learn@UW along with information about scheduling and assignments, and will from time to time send current events readings over email.

You are also required to read a national news source. You can obtain reduced-rate student subscriptions to the New York Times or the Wall St. Journal, and you can get easy access to most national newspapers via the web:


The Washington Post is free online when you connect from campus or register with a *.edu email address (which is what I recommend, as you can then get access to it anywhere). Local or regional papers (sorry, Chicago Tribune fans) and web pages for television news (CNN, MSNBC, ABC, Fox, etc) are not an adequate substitute. The exams will include questions about current national political events.

III. Grade Components
Your grade will be determined by your performance in four areas: section attendance and participation, and three in class exams (a 6 week and 12 week midterm, and a final). The weights for each are:

Section attendance and participation 20%
6 week exam 20%
12 week exam 25%
Final exam 35%

Discussion section attendance is required. The sections are a critical part of the course: they are a useful way to stay current with the class material, and are also a good place to seek help if you have questions. Your TA will provide you with more details about what is expected.

1 I cannot stress this enough: do not rely on earlier editions or, in the case of the textbook, the “brief” or “core” versions. The content, pagination, and organization will be different.

2 Google “Wall St. Journal/New York Times student subscriptions” to get the appropriate urls. Both are about $1 a week for digital access.
The reading load for this class is moderate (it averages about 90-100 pages per week), and it is vital that you stay current. Some of the readings are difficult, and you can’t expect to reel everything in 2 days before the exams. Readings for each week are listed in the syllabus, and you should be prepared to discuss them in section. **Discussion Sections will not meet the first week of class.**

**IV. Thoughts On Taking Notes on a Laptop (or, “Old Man Yells at Cloud”)**

You probably rely heavily on a laptop to take notes in class. What you probably don’t realize is that this is not a good educational strategy. Students who take notes longhand generally retain and understand more (*and get higher grades*) than students who use a laptop, mostly because when you use a laptop you are putting more effort into transcribing everything verbatim than trying to understand what the speaker is saying (and research shows that the laptop is what hurts). Taking notes longhand forces you to process information and analyze what is important as you go. The evidence is becoming overwhelming.³ And the distraction element is impossible to ignore. Few people can resist the temptation to go online to check email, shoot a text about how boring Federalist 10 is, or drop in on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, ESPN, or whatever site is your favorite. You may think you can multitask, but you can’t.

What’s even more compelling is that when you use a laptop or go online during class, you distract and lower the performance of people sitting around you.

So, I am banning laptop use in this class. You must take notes longhand. To make this easier I will make detailed lecture notes available prior to every class so you can print them out and use them as a template.

**However, I understand that some of you may have a legitimate educational reason to use a laptop to take notes.** There are a variety of circumstances that can justify this, but rather than specify what those are I will leave it to your judgement. You get the final decision on whether or not you have a legitimate reason. The only conditions are that if you decide that you will use a laptop in either lecture or section (or both), you must use it exclusively for note taking (and not multitasking or surfing) and you must notify me, either in an in-person meeting or via email.

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Course Administration

This is a large class. You may feel overwhelmed by the number of students and be tempted to fade into the background. That is understandable, but not necessary. Please see your TA or me if you have any questions or problems about the class, lectures, or readings (honest, we don't bite), or if you are facing other difficulties. It is always easier to deal with things when they come up, we're actually pretty good at helping, and we can direct you toward appropriate resources.

Here is a list of guidelines that will help us both make it through the class.

1. Don’t be reluctant to ask questions during lecture. If there is something that you don’t understand, if I’m talking too fast, or if you want clarification, don’t be bashful: Let me know. Trust me on this – if you have a question, other people do, too.

2. If you have a McBurney Disability Resource Center Visa, contact me as soon as possible so that we can review your accommodations.

3. Please use your wisc.edu email address when you communicate with me or your TA. We will not be able to respond to non-university email accounts.

4. Lectures are a connectivity-free zone. You will have to go off the grid during class: no phones, no texting, no email, no Twitter/Snapchat/Buzzfeed/Facebook/YouTube/etc.

Going offline will seem impossible at first, and your friends may worry that you have been kidnapped by extraterrestrials when you don't respond to their text messages within 15 seconds. But I assure you that you will not actually die from disconnecting, even though it may feel that way initially. You may even come to realize that you aren’t paying attention in class when you are online, and that you don’t really need to know if Netflix is serious about rebooting Firefly or whether Brienne of Tarth and Sandor Clegane are ever going to hook up, at least not right this second.

At the beginning of each lecture, I will ask you to disconnect and turn off and put away your phones. The TAs will help me monitor this.

Remember what the Dalai Lama says (or probably would say) about this kind of thing: if you’re here, be here.

5. There are no make-up exams; this size of the class simply precludes this. The dates of the midterm and final are listed below. Clear your calendars now. Exceptions to the no-make-up rule will be made only for cases of (1) absence due to membership on an officially recognized University group or athletic team that will be out of town on the day of an exam; (2) unexpected and serious illness or injury; (3) bona fide family emergencies. Be ready to provide documentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exam Type</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 week exam</td>
<td>Tuesday, October 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 week exam</td>
<td>Thursday, November 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>Saturday, December 16</td>
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If you know you have a schedule issue that falls into one of the excepted categories, see me as soon as you can.

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A few examples what doesn’t count: nonrefundable plane tickets, family vacations, activities of non-University groups such as fraternities or sororities, or 3 finals in 24 hours.
6. Your TA and I will always be willing to talk with you about your exam and assignment grades and suggest ways for you to improve your performance. We do our best to be fair and consistent in our grading. However, we do not haggle over grades or points, or provide extra credit assignments. Period. Barring clerical error, grades are final.

7. I expect all of you to conduct yourselves with integrity, and have some simple advice for those of you who may be tempted to rely on short-cuts and cheat your way through this class: don’t do it. It is a disgrace, and grossly unfair to your fellow students. Cheating encompasses, among other things: (1) plagiarism; (2) turning in work in your name that is not your own; (3) referring to notes or other written or electronic materials during exams; and (4) collaborating with others, copying someone else’s work, or providing answers to others in any fashion during exams or quizzes. If you need more information about the nature of misconduct and university policies, go to the Dean of Students web site on academic misconduct. This site also provides information about your rights in the event that you are accused of misconduct.

If I catch you cheating, you will receive an F for the course, and I will report your misconduct to the Dean of Students. This could prevent you from getting into some undergraduate programs here, interfere with plans to attend graduate or professional school, block you from obtaining a job that requires a government security clearance, or prevent admission to a state bar. It might also result in suspension or expulsion. That’s an enormous price to pay for a single act of dishonest stupidity. Let’s not go there.

I take this very, very seriously.

If you have any questions about these guidelines or need further clarification, please see me or your T.A.
Part I: Foundations and Structure

**Week 1**

Sept. 7  
Introduction and Administration.

**Readings**

None

**Week 2**

Sept. 12  
What is politics? What is American politics? What is American political culture? Values, interests, and the dilemmas of politics. A famous political scientist Harold Lasswell (1902-1978) wrote that “politics is who gets what, when, and how.” Is this true? What does it really mean?

**Readings**

TEXT:  chapter 1  
READER:  3, and 4,5 (Debate over American political identity)  

Sept. 14  
The Structure of American Politics: Culture, Context, and the Constitution

**Readings**

TEXT:  chapter 2  
READER:  6,7  

**Week 3**

Sept. 19  
Context and Structure of American Politics, continued

**Readings**

READER:  9,10,11 (Debate over amending the Constitution)

Sept. 21\(^5\)  
Institutions and Structure: Separation of Powers and Federalism

**Readings**

TEXT:  chapter 3  
READER:  12 (Federalist 46), 13, and 15, 16, 17 (Debate over Immigration reform and state authority)  
Additional:  The Federalist no. 51  

\(^5\) Rosh Hashana; if you observe the holiday, check with your TA to make sure you get any section material you might have missed. Full lecture notes will be online.
Week 4
Sept. 26  Balancing Government Power and Individual Rights – Civil Liberties
Readings
TEXT: chapter 4
READER: 19, and 20.21 (Debate over religious exemption to nondiscrimination laws)

Sept. 28  Civil Rights
Readings
TEXT: chapter 5
READER: 18
Additional: Martin Luther King, Jr, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,”

Week 5
Oct. 3  Congress: Structure and Process
Readings
TEXT: chapter 5
READER: 22,23

Oct. 5  Contemporary Challenges for Congress: Polarization and Gridlock
Readings
READER: 24, 25, 26

Week 6
Oct. 10  Six Week Exam (in class)

Oct. 12  The Presidency: The office and Powers
Readings
TEXT: chapter 7
READER: 27,28

Week 7
Oct 17  The Presidency: Contemporary controversies
Readings

Oct 19  The Courts: Structure and Function of the “Least Dangerous Branch”
Readings
TEXT: chapter 9
READER: 36, and 39-40 (Debate over congressional authority)
Marbury v. Madison p. 575-580
Part II: Participation

Week 8
Oct 24
Organizing to Promote Group Values and Interests. The Problem of Collective Action.

Readings
TEXT: chapter 13
READER: 57, 58, 59, and 60,61 (Debate over donor anonymity)

Oct 26
Political Parties

Readings
TEXT: chapter 12
READER: 54, and 55, 56 (Debate over third parties)

Week 9
Oct. 31
Public Opinion

Readings
TEXT: chapter 10
READER: 41, 42

Nov. 2
The Role of the Media in Contemporary Politics

Readings
TEXT: chapter 14
READER: 44,45,46 (Debate over partisan media)

Week 10
Nov. 7
Elections and Campaigns

Readings
TEXT: chapter 11
Additional: 47,48, 50-52 (Debate over voter ID)

Nov. 9
The 2016 Election

Readings
READER: 29,30,31 (Debate over Electoral College)

Part III: Policy and Process

Week 11
Nov. 14
Introduction to Analyzing Policy

Readings
Additional:
Learn@UW
Nov. 16        12 Week Exam (in class)

Week 12        Bureaucracy and Implementation
Nov. 21        Readings
                TEXT: chapter 8
                READER: 32, 33, and 34-35 (Debate over privatization)

Nov. 23        Thanksgiving

Week 13        Economic and Budget Policy
Nov. 28, 30    Readings
                TEXT: chapter 15
                READER: 62-64 and 65-67 (Debate over income inequality)

Week 14        Social Policy
Dec. 5, 7      Readings
                TEXT: chapter 16
                READER: 68 and 70-71 (Debate over ACA repeal)

Week 15        Foreign Affairs and Defense Policy
Dec. 12        Readings
                TEXT: chapter 17
                READER: 73 and 74-45 (Debate over use of military power)

FINAL EXAM: Saturday, December 16, 5:05-7:05PM, Rooms TBA