Goals and Structure

This Honors Class in "Introduction to American Government" will concentrate on three goals, and it is the combination of these three, rather than the load in any one, that should distinguish the class:

• The first is, of course, to acquire the basics for understanding and interpreting American politics. Here, there is a set of topics—the separation of powers, nomination by primary election, and so forth—that any knowledgeable person would have to master. We shall master them, too. Accordingly, the most formal part of our sessions will be directed to this goal, through lectures on key topics. So, in part, will the readings, though you will probably have other uses for them as well. A major examination will test achievement of this goal. This is the institutional backdrop to American politics. An understanding of it ought to stay with you for a long time.

• The second goal is to attain some familiarity with the evolution of American politics during ‘our time’—which will mean, for this class, the end of the Second World War through December of 2015. This goal is based on the belief that interpretation of modern American politics is almost impossible without understanding where it came from, that is, the sequence and context of its development. There will be readings focused on this as well, and later lectures will
address it explicitly. There will be a minor examination testing this goal directly. There will also be a serious term paper that will help to integrate both halves of the class.

- And the third goal is to apply the understandings gained from class lectures and research projects to the events of politics as they unfold during our time together. In other words, if we get the first part of the class right—if the things we are addressing through lectures and readings really are essential to understanding American politics—then it ought to be possible to observe them ‘in action’ as we go about our business. At the same time, serious students of current affairs ought to move from being a glorified cheering section (hurrah for my heroes, boo for yours) to being informed observers, who begin to understand why political actors do what they do. Daily reading of a national newspaper will be the major tool here, followed by discussion during most class periods.

In this regard, the fall semester of 2015 has its own distinctive place in the chronicle of American politics. In formal terms, we are going to be in class together during the final days of the first session of the 114th Congress, under a lame-duck President moving into the final year of his presidency. So we shall be looking in particular for the point when the effort to pass legislation through Congress gets displaced by efforts to set up the presidential contest of 2016 instead. And we will get to observe the policy agenda for the new term of the Supreme Court, plus all the spontaneous developments, domestic but especially international, that can never be foreseen but that always color American politics in major ways.
In any case, a weekly class ought to have three parts. Number one is a formal lecture on the main focus of the day. This is the largest part, though as you will see, even it varies substantially in the course of the semester. Number two is some planning for, and then collective help with, the term paper, plus any other administrative business that we need to do. For several classes, specialists will visit us (or we will visit them) to offer advice on developing a serious research project. And number three is discussion of current events since we last met, not for their own sake, much less for how we feel about them, but for how they fit with—or stress—the other things that we are learning along the way. The pages that follow set all three of these elements out.

In return, your responsibilities are: first, to do the assigned readings and attend class; second, to get an early start on the term paper; and third, to read a national newspaper regularly, by which I mean The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal, or The Financial Times. Note that most of these can be read on the web rather than from the newsstand if you prefer. While I believe that it is more productive to read your chosen paper in hard copy, I do not insist on it. Likewise, while I believe that missing lectures in the first half of the class is self-destructive, I do not insist on attendance. For the second half, I do.

The final pages in this packet address possibilities for the term paper, and the paper itself is discussed there. But note again the organization of the class, which I have tried to adjust so as to make your responsibilities as easy to meet as possible:
• The first week will be purely organizational—short and sweet, aimed at setting up all that follows.

• The next eight weeks cover the absolute fundamentals of American government. We shall try to acquire these basics while simultaneously setting up the term papers. Readings are important, but the substance of these lectures is even more critical to the main examination.

• The tenth week is then an examination covering all these basics. Note that this exam, not the one in the exam period, is the major one for the class.

• In the five weeks (but only four lectures) that follow, I shall try to put all these elements back together in a more comprehensive fashion, through lectures aimed at the bigger picture. These lectures are video-based, supported by campaign advertisements from the television era, and meant to place modern politics in the context of postwar political history, while taking some of the load off your shoulders during the period when you should be working intensively on the paper.

• A shorter examination during our scheduled exam time will cover the shorter half of the class, the one involving a postwar overview.

In the end, grades will be based 40% on the main examination, 40% on the term paper, and 20% on this shorter exam at the end. There will be an additional 5%, a potential ‘bonus’ or ‘cushion’, that is meant to recognize positive classroom contributions, as with helpful discussion of relevant current events in particular. Term papers are due in my email at the usual class time (9:30 AM) on Friday, December 18, which is one week after our final class.
Political Science 184
Class Program

Week 1. Organizational Session.

Week 2. Lecture: “What Kind of Government?”
Work Session: Introduction of Class Members

Week 3. Lecture: “What Kind of Society?”
Work Session: Introduction of Paper Topics

Week 4. Lecture: “What Kind of Politics?”
Work Session: Discussion of Paper Topics

Week 5. Lecture: “The Presidency”
Work Session: Researching Scholarly Papers, Memorial Library

Week 6. Lecture: “Congress”
Work Session: Reference Lessons for the Papers

Week 7. Lecture: “The Courts”
Work Session: Paper Synopsis

Week 8. Lecture: “Political Parties”
Work Session: Writing Scholarly Papers, The Writing Center

Work Session: Exam Preparations

Week 10. Major Examination

Week 11. Lecture: “The Late New Deal Era”
Work Session: The 2014 Midterm Elections

Work Session: Examination Review

Week 13. Thanksgiving Holiday

Work Session: Trouble-Shooting the Papers

Week 15. Lecture: “The Obama Years—and After?”
Work Session: Final Organizing Details
Political Science 184  
Reading List  

Part I  
Background to American Politics  

Week 2. September 11. What Kind of Government?  
“Constitutional Foundations”, Chapter 1 &  
“American Federalism”, Chapter 2 in  
David B. Magleby & Paul C. Light, Choices: Honors Intro to American Government  

Week 3. September 18. What Kind of Society?  
“What is the American Way? Four Themes in Search of Their Next Incarnation,” Chapter 10 in Byron E. Shafer, The Two Majorities and the Puzzle of Modern American Politics  

Week 4. September 25. What Kind of Politics?  
“Public Opinion, Participation, and Voting”, Chapter 3 in Magleby & Light, Choices: Honors Intro  

Part II  
Fundamentals of American Government  

Week 5. October 2. The Presidency  
“The Presidency”, Chapter 5 in Magleby & Light, Choices: Honors Intro  
“The Presidency”, Chapter 10 in Wilson, American Government  

Week 6. October 9. Congress  
“Congress”, Chapter 4 in Magleby & Light, Choices: Honors Intro  
“Congress”, Chapter 9 in Wilson, American Government
Week 7. October 16. The Courts
“The Judiciary”, Chapter 6 in
Magleby & Light, Choices: Honors Intro
“The Judiciary”, Chapter 12 in
Wilson, American Government

Week 8. October 23. Political Parties
“Political Parties?”, Chapter 7 in
Magleby & Light, Choices: Honors Intro
“Political Parties and Interest Groups”, Chapter 7 in
Wilson, American Government

Week 9. October 30. The Bureaucracy, Interest Groups, & Mass Media
“The Bureaucracy”, Chapter 11 in
Wilson, American Government
“Interest Groups”, Chapter 8 &
“The Media and U.S. Politics”, Chapter 9 in
Magleby & Light, Choices: Honors Intro

Week 10. November 6. Examination

Part III
The Pattern of Modern American Politics

Week 11. November 13. The Late New Deal Era

Week 12. November 20. The Era of Divided Government
“The Search for a New Center”, Chapter 2 in Shafer, The Two Majorities

Week 13. November 27. Thanksgiving Holiday
No assigned reading

Week 14. December 4. The Clintno-Bush Years

Week 15. December 11. The Obama Years—and After?
Byron E. Shafer, “The Three Worlds of Postwar American Politics: Political Orders and Scholarly Eras”, manuscript form
N.B. All readings that are not in one of the assigned books for this class can be found at: http://faculty.polisci.wisc.edu/beshafer. Go there, and click on “PS 184”.
Much of Political Science 184 is devoted to larger aspects and continuing trends in American politics, those things that, if they are not constant, are obviously important at a given point in time and reasonably stable across time as well. Yet American politics has also changed substantially during the years since the Second World War, and this paper is intended to focus on some major aspect of that change, of how we got from ‘then’ to ‘now’.

The major institutions of American national government—the Presidency, Congress, and the Court—work differently now than they did then. The major intermediaries of American politics—political parties, interest groups, and mass media of information—work differently now than they did then. The very nature of American society—its total population, its key social groups, the concerns of their members—is different.

So is the substance of public policy, the things about which people fight within that politics. Economic policy, about the distribution of material goods, is different. Cultural policy, about proper standards of behavior, is different as well. Foreign affairs, civil rights, trade, the environment, taxation, criminal justice, social welfare, civil liberties, macroeconomics, education, family structure: all have come onto (and gone off) the policy dial.

A term paper addressing one of these changes needs to do four things. First, it needs to describe the situation in the years following the Second World War, roughly 1946-1966. Second, it needs to describe the situation in recent years,
roughly 1994-2014. Third, it needs to note what has changed, and to try to say something about why. And fourth, it needs to conclude by saying why the change matters.

These are not intended to be long papers. Think in terms of 25 pages, with a 20-page minimum and a 30-page maximum. But remember: at that length, the need to have three clear sections (then, now, and change), a paragraph or two of introduction, plus a short conclusion will force some careful thinking about what is important and what is not.

Note that this also implies a trade-off in picking topics. Small and focused topics are easier to write and easier to work into the required format. But they also require more digging in their research. Larger and less focused topics make it easier to amass information. But they are harder to ingest, to organize, and to present concretely and in detail. On balance, smaller and more focused topics are likely to serve you better, but I shall suggest a variety of possibilities of both sorts.

Lastly, you are welcome to develop an existing interest by way of this paper. But note that the detachment necessary to write such a paper may be easier to sustain in a topic or area which you do not (at least, not at the moment) regard as emotionally important, as opposed to a topic or area which you do. I shall say some things in our first class session about how a self-conscious political scientist ought to think about such matters.

With that as background, here are some topics that I can recommend for a term paper in this class. Any one of these will be acceptable, and most offer many different ways to address them. They may suggest other topics to you that are not
on the list, and these can easily be acceptable too, as long as we discuss them first. All we need is to be agreed that they have the same general scope as those already on the list. Every year, a goodly share of the class studies one of these topics of their own choosing.
The Presidency

Presidential Nominations and/or Elections
Organization of the White House Office
Presidential Policy Selection
Presidents in Economic Policy
Presidents in Foreign Policy
Presidents in Social Policy

Congress

Congressional Elections
Committee Organization
Floor Organization and Leadership
Congress in Economic Policy
Congress in Foreign Policy
Congress in Social Policy

The Supreme Court

Judicial Selection
Court Operations
Decision-Making
Courts in Economic Policy
Courts in Foreign Policy
Courts in Social Policy
Society

Population Growth and Decline

Social Group Advance and Retreat

‘Exceptionalism’

Political Participation

Economic Policy Divisions among the Public

Foreign Policy Divisions among the Public

Social Policy Divisions among the Public

Political Parties

Mass Public Identifications with Parties

Group Attachments to Parties

Nature of Party Organizations

Partisan Fund-Raising

Evolution of Party Factions

The Major Parties and Economic Policy

The Major Parties and Foreign Policy

The Major Parties and Social Policy

Interest Groups

Main Organized Interests, Growth and Decline

Lobbying National Government

Organized Interests in Electoral Politics

Evolution of Major Interest Group(s)
Organized Interests and Economic Policy
Organized Interests and Foreign Policy
Organized Interests and Social Policy

Mass Media of Information
Changing Mix of Media
Television News and National Politics
Radio News and National Politics
Newspaper News and National Politics
Press Coverage of National Government
Government Use of Mass Media

Governance
Size and Role of National Government
Federalism and Its Evolution
Separation of Powers
Divided Government (Split Partisan Control)