INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POLITICS  POL SCI 21A  FALL 2015

Professor Wattenberg  mpwatten@uci.edu  Office Hours: before and after lectures on the patio area outside the lecture room (weather permitting)

Teaching Assistants & section assignments:
Genna Beckenhaupt  gbeckenh@uci.edu  Mon 2PM; Wed 9AM; Fri 10AM  
Jonathan Cervas  jcervas@uci.edu  Tues 11AM; Thu 11AM; Thu 12PM  
Brett Savage  bsavage@uci.edu  Tues 3PM; Tues 4PM; Wed 12PM (section 13)  
Connor Strobel  cstrobel@uci.edu  Mon 10AM; Wed 12PM (section 7); Fri 12PM


Grading:  There will be two midterms and a final exam.  Each midterm will count for 25% of your grade, and the final will count for 50%.  The midterms will be held during class on Friday Jan. 23th and Wednesday Feb. 18th.  A take-home final will be distributed by email after the last lecture; it is due back to your TA by 5PM on Tuesday March 17th.  Section participation and attendance may also be factored into final grades by your teaching assistant.

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Readings:

Introduction  1/5

GIA, Chapter entitled, “Introducing Government in America”

DeTocqueville, Democracy in America, chap. 3 --
http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/1_ch03.htm

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The Constitution  1/7, 1/9

GIA, Chapter entitled, “The Constitution”


Fareed Zakaria, “Does America Need a Prime Minister?”

Fareed Zakaria, “Fareed’s Take: Prime Minister of America?”

Levinson, “Our Imbecilic Constitution” –
http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/28/our-imbecilic-constitution/

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Public Opinion  1/12, 1/14

GIA, Chapter entitled, “Public Opinion and Political Action”


Joe Klein, “Dumb or Just Badly Educated, or Maybe Just Lazy”-- http://swampland.time.com/2010/01/25/dumb-or-just-badly-educated-or-maybe-just-lazy/


The Media  1/16, 1/21

GIA, Chapter entitled, “The Mass Media and the Political Agenda”


Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj, “There Won’t be a Liberal Rush: The Economics of Conservative Media” -- http://www.salon.com/2013/12/28/there_wont_be_a_liberal_rush_the_economics_of_conservative_media/

Craig Fehrman, “The incredible shrinking sound bite: It’s not just a modern problem — and may not be such a bad thing after all.” Boston Globe, January 2, 2011 – http://boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2011/01/02/the_incredible_shrinking_sound_bite/?page=full

MIDTERM EXAM #1  FRIDAY January 23th -- BRING A BLUE BOOK!!!!

Political Parties  1/26, 1/28

GIA, Chapter entitled, “Political Parties”


Richard Pildes, “How to Fix Our Polarized Politics? Strengthen Political Parties” –
Morris Fiorina, “Gridlock is bad. The alternative is worse” --

Voting Behavior and Elections  1/30, 2/2, 2/4, 2/6

GIA, Chapter entitled, “Campaigns and Voting Behavior” [in older editions, this material was split into two chapters entitled “Nominations and Campaigns” and “ Elections and Voting Behavior”]

David Burchell, “Why US is the Great Democracy” The Australian, March 17 2008 –

Mark Barabak, “Feeling left out in the Golden State as presidential campaign heats up”--


Geoffrey Skelley, “Putting Their Eggs in the Wrong Midterm Basket.” Sabato’s Crystal Ball, March 27, 2014 --

Interest Groups   2/9, 2/11, 2/13

GIA, Chapter entitled, “Interest Groups”

MIDTERM EXAM #2  Wednesday February 18th -- BRING A BLUE BOOK!!!!

Congress   2/20, 2/23, 2/25

GIA, Chapter entitled, “Congress”


Supreme Court: 2/27, 3/2, 3/4

GIA, Chapter entitled, “The Federal Courts”


Read the majority opinion (pp. 5-29) and the Scalia dissent (pp. 64-87) for *Roper v. Simmons* – to be emailed to the class list

Presidency & Executive Branch: 3/6, 3/9, 3/11, 3/13

GIA, Chapters entitled, “The Presidency” and “The Federal Bureaucracy”


“Five Questions for George Edwards,” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, March 29, 2009 -- to be emailed to the class list


TAKE HOME FINAL TO BE DISTRIBUTED BY EMAIL AT THE END OF CLASSES ON FRIDAY MARCH 13th. Exams are to be returned to your Teaching Assistant by 5PM on TUESDAY MARCH 17th. Your TA will inform you as to the details for your section.

YOU SHOULD NOT SHOW UP FOR THE SCHEDULED 8AM FRIDAY EXAM FOR THIS CLASS!

Discussion Topics: The following questions will be discussed in weekly section meetings, and also serve as a study guide for this course. Topics 1-3 will be covered prior to the first midterm, topics 4-6 will be covered between the first and second midterms, and topics 7-10 will be covered after the second midterm.

Topic #1 The Constitution and Separation of Powers
Why did America’s Founding Fathers design a system of separate institutions sharing power? Is this system still appropriate in the age of the welfare state and nuclear weapons? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the American constitutional structure as compared to parliamentary government? Which system would you recommend to emerging democracies?

Topic #2 American Public Opinion
Democratic theory presumes that in a democracy people are well informed enough to guide the policies that their government pursues. Yet much Political Science research in the U.S. has uncovered shockingly low levels of public information about politics. Is the American public well informed enough to guide the policies of the U.S. government? Does the lack of public information about issues pose an especially worrisome problem for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy?

Topic #3 Mass Media and Agenda Setting
In his famous book entitled Understanding Media, Marshall McLuhan coined the famous phrase, "The medium is the message." By this, McLuhan meant that the way events are conveyed can be more important than the events themselves. In the U.S., news is conveyed through a media driven by the need to make a profit as opposed to provide a public service. What are some of the consequences of the American media’s profit-driven reporting of the news?

Topic #4 Political Parties
A key feature of British government is the principle of collective responsibility. It has often been said that one of the major problems with American political parties is the weakness of collective responsibility. Why is it that American political parties find it so much more difficult than British parties to say precisely what they plan to do and then do what they say? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the way the American political party system works?

Topic #5 Nominations and Campaigns
The selection of Democratic and Republican Party presidential nominees is the most open and participatory process for selecting party leaders anywhere in the democratic world. Yet it is widely criticized by scholars and politicians alike. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this system? How might it be improved for 2016?
Topic #6  Interest Groups
America’s founding fathers designed a constitutional structure that they thought would control the power of interest groups. Considering the current state of interest group politics, how well did they succeed? How do interest group activities impact representation by the Congress and leadership by the president?

Topic #7  Congress I
In a classic cartoon one Congressman is pictured saying to another, "There are days Hank when I don't know who's president, what state I'm from, or even if I'm a Democrat or a Republican, but by God I still know how to bottle up a piece of legislation!" What are the major hurdles bills have to get through in order to become law? Is it fair to say that in the U.S. Congress it is much more difficult to pass a bill than to block one? What makes the U.S. Congress different in this respect compared to parliamentary democracies?

Topic #8  Congress II
The U.S. Congress is unique among the world's bicameral legislatures in that the upper house is more powerful than the more representative lower house. How do the U.S. House and Senate compare? Do you think it would be better for American democracy if the Senate operated more like the House of Representatives?

Topic #9  Supreme Court
How do the majority and dissenting opinions in the recent case involving the death penalty for juvenile offenders (Roper v. Simmons) illustrate the opposing principles of judicial activism and judicial restraint?

Topic #10  Presidency
The president is often said to be the most powerful person on earth. Yet he is often handcuffed by an uncooperative Congress. What are the sources of tension between the executive and legislative branches that have caused presidential successes on domestic policy to be the exception rather than the rule? How is foreign policy different in this respect?
GENERAL COURSE GUIDELINES

There is only one grading standard for everyone. We can’t take into account whether English is your native language or not.

If you need to pass this class in order to graduate at the end of this quarter, it is advisable that you inform your TA that your progress needs to be specially monitored. Once the exams are in, it is too late to do anything to help you. Thus, your TA should keep a close eye on your performance throughout this class in order to give you any help you might need.

If you wish to drop this class after the second week is over, you must negotiate this with the UCI bureaucracy. The instructor plays no role in this, having waived the right to approve or deny such requests.

There will be no “extra credit” opportunities given out in this course. No one will be allowed to compensate for deficient work by undertaking extra assignments.

Incompletes are given only in cases of unavoidable and unforeseen circumstances, such as a major illness, preventing a student from completing the course requirements. Verifiable documentary evidence, such as a Doctor’s note, is required.

Should you be unable to take an examination, a take-home make-up exam will be given if you can provide verifiable documentary evidence of an unavoidable circumstance explaining your inability to make the scheduled time. If your excuse is foreseeable, such as a road game for a UCI team sport, you must provide your TA with your evidence ahead of time. If your excuse involves an unexpected problem, such as a major illness, you must provide your TA with your evidence as soon as you are back to normal. Make-up exams consist of substantially more difficult questions which you are allowed to take home for 72 hours. The start time should be as soon as possible after the scheduled time is missed. Make-up exams will not be given out before the exam is actually given to the whole class.

All questions about grading must first be discussed with the Teaching Assistant who assigned the grade. Should you be dissatisfied with the TA's explanation of the grade, you may then ask the TA to forward the work in question to the Professor for further evaluation. At this point, it is recommended that you write an accompanying note indicating why you feel that the grade is not appropriate. Please keep in mind that appeals are not risk free. Once an appeal is lodged, everything is up for reevaluation. Thus, your grade could be lowered as well as raised.
RESPONSES TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Can I use an older version of the textbook?
We will be teaching from the 2012 Election version of Government in America. If you want to do well in this course, you should buy this edition. If you cannot afford the price of this book, you should buy the most recent version that you can afford. Some of the older editions can be found online for less than the price of lunch at Blaze Pizza. Keep in mind that you get what you pay for – the money you save by buying an old book will come at the cost of educational quality.

Can I buy an e-book instead of the book at the bookstore?
Yes, absolutely. The most recent edition was specifically designed with e-book readers in mind.

Will there be any section meetings the first week?
Perhaps. We will try to get the sections going as soon as possible in order to help students prepare for the first midterm. Announcements regarding section meetings will be made by email during the first week.

What is the format of the midterm exams?
Each midterm usually involves 1 essay and 4-5 short answer definitions. The essay usually has at least 3 parts. (In other words, multiple topics must be addressed within the essay). Short answer definitions require a full paragraph which explains and identifies the significance of a key term.

What parts of the course will be emphasized on the final exam, and what will be the format?
The take-home final exam will have two essays. Because it is a take-home, there will not be definitions. One question will comprehensive, asking you to make an assessment of how well the American political process works. The second question will focus on the political institutions covered after the second midterm – namely, Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Presidency and the Executive Branch. There will be a page limit of 15 pages double-spaced, Times Roman 12 font. There is no minimum page limit – obviously, you should write as much as you can in order to do well.

Will a study guide be distributed prior to exams?
You should consider pages 5&6 of this syllabus to be a study guide. The TAs may also distribute a study guide specifically for their sections.

Is attendance at sections mandatory?
No. The reason to come to sections should be that you will learn from them – not that you have to. Each section meeting has a specific agenda, as displayed on pages 5&6 of this syllabus. Because the TAs will be reviewing the key topics of this class in sections, you should benefit greatly from attending.

Will the book be on library reserve?
Yes, it will soon be on 2-hour reserve.

Do I really need to know all the statistics displayed on the screen in lecture?
What you should learn are the general patterns and concepts which these statistics illustrate. It is unnecessary to memorize specific numbers.
Do I really need to know the specific details about governments in other countries that have been discussed? What you need to know is how American government is different from parliamentary systems.

I am from another country and know very little about American government; is there anything I can do to catch up with the rest of the class? Read the U.S. constitution (printed in the back of GIA) closely. Also, start following American political news regularly. Some suggestions for online reading can be found below.

Can you recommend anything on the internet to read to help me with this course? The sites www.politicalwire.com and www.realclearpolitics.com provide a good daily sampling of articles about American politics. An excellent new source of current political analysis by Political Scientists can be found at the Monkey Cage blog, now hosted by the Washington Post. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/.

If my I miss a section, can I go to another section? No problem, as long as you attend another section held by your TA.

Can I permanently change the section I am in? You can only change if the computer lets you, i.e., if space becomes available.