
Political Science 40: Introduction to American Politics UCLA

Class Times: Monday-Friday, 9am-12

Location: TBD

Purpose of the Course

As the title suggests, this course is an introduction to politics in the United States of America. Politics is the process through which people engage in collective action. Understanding politics requires understanding why people engage in collective action to begin with, how they do so, and what the consequences are. In particular it will be important to understand how they create and sustain evolving institutions that organize this collective action, and how these institutions work. Although American politics may not always seem logical, the political system was created and persists to serve certain needs, and so it has a certain logic. The purpose of this course is to provide students with basic facts about American politics, some explanation of the logic of American politics and an introduction to how social scientists learn about the world. Along the way we will engage with numerous examples from political history and current American politics.

Learning Goals

1. Students will learn about the fundamental institutions and features of American politics, and will be able to situate this knowledge in American political history.
2. Students will learn how political scientists advance knowledge about politics, with a special emphasis on the methods and models used most prominently to study American politics. This includes basic data analysis and formal logic.
3. Students will learn to engage critically with claims that people make about politics. They will learn to be particularly suspicious of claims that appeal to them for non-evidentiary reasons.
4. Students will learn the fundamentals of making clear arguments and evaluating arguments with evidence.

Required Textbook

Samuel Kernell, Gary C. Jacobson, Thad Kousser, and Lynn Vavreck. *The Logic of American Politics*, 10th edition. CQ Press. (hard copy or ebook)

Course Requirements

Participation – 10%

Midterm – 25%

Essay Assignment – 25%

Final – 40%

Some of the material on the exams will be discussed in the class but not in the reading, and some of it will be discussed in the reading but not covered in depth in class. It is important that students do all of the reading and attend all of the classes! Exams use

multiple different question formats including multiple choice, short answer and short essay questions.

Three days into the class I will assign a five-page essay, due on Wednesday of week 3. Part of your job during the intervening six weeks will be to think about what you are learning in the context of your essay assignment, and to incorporate what you have learned into your argument. The essay will ask you to pass judgement on some of the fundamental features of American politics and draw on your knowledge of both the Constitutional structure of these institutions and their modern functioning in order to make your argument. The most important aspect of this essay is that you (1) make an argument, (2) make empirical claims in support of that argument, (3) provide evidence for those claims, and (4) defend those empirical claims against possible critiques.

It goes without saying that all of your graded work must be done by you without assistance from others. You are encouraged to discuss the class and materials with others, but your answers to exam questions must be yours and yours alone, with proper attribution for sources you wish to cite. If you are unfamiliar with the University’s policy on academic dishonesty and associated penalties, see <http://www.deanofstudents.ucla.edu>.

Outside of the Course

Students should keep up with current events so you can reinforce what you’ve learned and better understand what is happening in politics today. Politico is now probably the dominant player in purely political news. National newspapers are also good resources, particularly the New York Times, which has consolidated its central role in journalism of all kinds, and the Washington Post, with its focus on the nation’s capital. The Washington Post’s Monkey Cage blog is an accessible source for insights from political science about recent political developments.

Schedule of the Course

Day	Date	Topic	Reading
Week 1			
	6/21	The Articles of Confederation to the Constitution	LAP Ch. 1 Federalist 51 The Articles of Confederation (in LAP) The US Constitution (in LAP)
	6/22	The Basic Constitutional Framework Paper Assigned	LAP Ch. 2 Dahl, “How Democratic is the US Constitution?”
	6/23	Federalism	LAP Ch. 3 p. 83-102 Walters, Jonathan, and Donald F. Kettl. “The Katrina Breakdown.”
	6/24	Civil Rights and	LAP Ch. 5

		Civil Liberties	
Week 2			
	6/27	Congress 1: Representation	LAP Ch. 6, p.214-241 Mayhew p. 49-67
	6/28	Congress 2: lawmaking	LAP Ch. 6, p.242-271 Binder, "Would a GOP Senate make a difference?" New York Times, "Why the Senate Couldn't Pass a Crime Bill."
	6/29	Midterm The Presidency	LAP Ch. 7
	6/30	The Bureaucracy and Interest Groups	LAP Ch. 8
	7/1	The Courts	LAP Ch. 9
Week 3			
Monday	7/4	July 4 th Holiday	
Tuesday	7/5	Public Opinion	Converse p. 1-5 LAP Ch. 10 Zaller, "Coming to Grips with V. O. Key's Concept of Latent Opinion." p. 1-9
Wednesday	7/6	Paper Due Voting and Elections	Downs, page 114 to 122 LAP Ch. 11 Campbell, James E. "Forecasting the 2012 American National Elections."
Thursday	7/7	Polarization and Political Parties	Fiorina, Parties as Problem Solvers McCarty, Nolan. "The Policy Consequences of Political Polarization."
Friday	7/8	Final Exam	