American Politics

Module Description: This module provides an introduction to American Government institutions and processes. We will discuss the design and rationale for the American political system and the implications it has for governing and the policy making process. We will also examine how reforms to governmental institutions and processes might influence the way citizens interact with government. Throughout the module we will make comparisons between the American system and other democracies around the world.

Readings: The following is a list of essential and recommended readings. These are available in the campus library but you might also want to buy the textbook by Fiorina et al. Chapters from books are on WebCT.


Lectures and Tutorials: The course is taught by weekly lectures, linked tutorials and independent study. Lectures present the theoretical framework, key issues and debates and help guide your reading. Tutorials consist of presentations and group discussion focused on study questions and issues raised by students. You will be given a handout for the tutorials which will follow from the lecture topics. All students will give presentations and will be expected to have read enough to contribute to the group discussions.

Intended Learning Outcomes: The following list is provided to give you a general idea of what all students are expected to learn by taking this course. Please keep in mind that this is not an exhaustive list.
1. Describe the rationale for the design of the American political system and how it differs from that used in other modern democracies.
2. Be familiar with the implications of that design for governing and the policy making process.
3. Understand why some citizens choose to participate in the political process while others do not.
4. Understand the role that political parties and interest groups play in the political process.
5. Understand how citizens form opinions about government and public policy and why their opinions may change over time.
6. Be able to explain what the most important factors are that determine why citizens vote the way they do and why it matters.
7. Understand the role of congressional committees in the legislative process
8. Understand the powers and limitations of presidential power in domestic and foreign policy.
9. Understand the role of the U.S. Supreme Court in the political process.
10. Describe and evaluate political and electoral reforms and their likely consequences.
Assessment: One 1500-2000 word essay (50%) and a 1500-2000 word take-home exam (50%). Details about the essay will be distributed in class in the third week. The essay will be due on 27 November by 4pm. The take-home exam will be distributed on 13 January and will be due on 15 January by 4pm. All assessed work must be submitted to the school office and must be there by 4:00 PM on the stated day or the computer does not accept it.

Module Schedule

13 October: The U.S. Constitutional Framework

Topics: The problem of tyranny of the majority and the solution
Essential reading: America’s New Democracy Ch. 1-3
Recommended reading: How Democratic is the American Constitution?

20 October: Ideology and Public Opinion

Topics: Conservative vs. liberal, polls, and trends in public opinion
Essential reading: America’s New Democracy Ch. 4-5; Good Citizen Ch. 6.
Recommended reading: Culture War? Ch. 1-6

27 October: Political Parties and Interest Groups

Topics: Reasons for the two party system, party competition, role of party identification
Essential reading: America’s New Democracy Ch. 8, Culture War? Ch. 7
Recommended reading: Culture War? Ch. 8-10.

3 November: Voting and Elections

Topics: The 2008 presidential election, the problem of low voter turnout, understanding vote choice
Essential reading: America’s New Democracy Ch. 6-7; Is Voting for Young People? Ch. 4
Recommended reading: The Good Citizen Ch. 1-4.

4 November: Election Day

10 November: (Study Week, No Class)

17 November: Representation

Topics: Redistricting and incumbency advantage, congressional elections, highlights of the 2008 election.
Essential reading: Redistricting and Representation; The Politics of Congressional Elections, Ch. 3 (on Web CT),

24 November: Congress

Topics: Party leadership, committees, and the legislative process
Essential reading: America’s New Democracy Ch. 9, The Good Citizen Ch. 7

27 November: Essays due
1 December: Presidency

Topics: Powers of the presidency, foreign policy, popularity
Essential Reading: America’s New Democracy Ch.10, A Divider, Not a Uniter Ch.8, The Politics of the Presidency Ch.10 (both on WebCT)
Recommended Reading: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, The Imperial Presidency. (On reserve)

8 December: The Courts

Topics: Principle of judicial review, activism and restraint, role in the political process, Bush v. Gore.
Essential Reading: America’s New Democracy Ch.12, Except from The Choices Justices Make (on WebCT), “The Impact of Bush v. Gore on Public Perceptions and Knowledge of the Supreme Court” (on WebCT).

12 January: Direct Democracy and Reform

Topics: Arguments for and against direct democracy, initiative, referendum, recall. Can the American system be improved? Alternatives and prospects.
Essential Reading: Rethinking American Electoral Democracy

13 January: Take-home exam distributed

15 January: Take-home exam due by 4pm

Essay Writing Guide

You can find lots of advice relating to essay writing at:
http://www.huss.ex.ac.uk/politics/undergrad/polEssayWriting.pdf
http://www.services.ex.ac.uk/cas/employability/askills/essay/index.htm

You can also find other useful advice related to general study skills at:
http://www.services.ex.ac.uk/edu/student-learning-skills/resources.shtml

Overlap of assessed work: Students are reminded that they are not permitted to submit the same piece of work for assessment in two different modules, or substantially reproduce essay or exam answers within modules. Essays or dissertations which are found to duplicate entirely, or in part, the work which a student has already submitted for assessment will be subject to a penalty depending on an assessment of the severity of the case. In extreme cases a mark of 0 might be awarded. Students who are concerned about possible overlap in their assessed work should seek advice from their Module Leaders. Students who are resitting modules where they are required to re-submit coursework in all modules (other than the dissertation) must ensure that the coursework is new work and has not previously formed part of any assignment assessed by the Department.

Essay marking: The following criteria will be used in assessing your essays:
1. Definition of the topic
   • Has the topic been clearly defined and directly addressed?
2. Structure of the essay
   • Does the introduction present a clear statement of the issues to be covered?
   • Does the essay have a clear structure or organisation in which a) the main points are developed logically; and b) the relevance of the material to the theme or argument is clear?
   • Is there an effective conclusion which draws together the main points?
3. Content
   • Is there evidence of adequate reading and research?
   • Has the question being answered?
   • Is the breadth of coverage adequate?
   • Are the issues and ideas analysed in sufficient depth?
   • Are arguments supported by evidence, examples, sources and quotations?
4. Analysis
• Are the arguments logical and consistent?
• Are opinions based on evidence and/or logic?
• Does the essay show evidence of original or independent thought?

5. Presentation
• Fluency and style of writing
• Spelling, grammar, paragraphing
• Presentation of data: effective use of figures and tables and correct use of units and quantities
• Neatness and legibility
• Are sources acknowledged? Are references cited? Are references presented correctly?

Plagiarism: Cheating (plagiarism) is defined as any illegitimate behaviour designed to deceive those setting, administering and marking the assessment. Cheating may take various forms, including:

1.1 The use of unauthorized books, notes, electronic aids or other materials in an examination
1.2 Obtaining an examination paper ahead of its authorized release
1.3 Acting dishonestly in any way including the fabrication of data, whether before, during or after an examination or other assessment so as to either obtain or offer to others an unfair advantage in that examination or assessment;
1.4 Collusion i.e. the representation of another’s work or ideas as one’s own without appropriate acknowledgement or referencing, where the owner of the work knows of the situation and both parties work towards the deceit of marker. (In plagiarism the author of the work has not knowingly authorized the use of her or his work).
1.5 Plagiarism i.e. the act of representing another’s work or idea as one’s own without appropriate acknowledgement or referencing. There are three main types of plagiarism:
1.5.1 Direct copying from a book, article, fellow student’s essay, student or lecturer’s handout, thesis, web page or other source without proper acknowledgement.
1.5.2 Claiming individual ideas derived from a book, article, handout, thesis, web page or other source as one’s own, and incorporating them into one’s own work without acknowledging the source of these ideas.
1.5.3 Overly depending on the work of one or more works (as outlined in 1.5.1 above) without proper acknowledgement of the source. By, for example, constructing a piece of written work based on extracting large sections of text from another source and merely linking these together with a few of one’s own sentences.

How to avoid being accused of plagiarism: In order to avoid being accused of the more inadvertent forms of plagiarism you need to ensure that you adopt the following aspects of good practice.

2.1 Adopt a good note-taking technique.
2.1.1 You need to make sure while you are reading and taking notes that you keep accurate records of the author, title, and publication details of source, including page numbers (if relevant).
2.1.2 You need to make clear in your own notes where you have copied a quote word for word from your source, so that when you come to write up your notes you know which parts are in your own words, and which are in the words of your source.
2.1.3 Similarly you need to make clear in your own notes where you have taken an idea from your source.
2.2 Accurate referencing. Make that you have referenced your work in accordance with the referencing guide set out in your departmental handbook; remember referencing conventions do vary between disciplines. Plagiarism consists of any form of passing off, or attempting to pass off, the knowledge or work of others as one's own. It is a form of cheating. Examples of plagiarism include unattributed quotes from a book, magazine or article; copying from the notes or essays of others; the submission of work actually written or dictated by others; and unattributed use of other peoples’ ideas. Remember, plagiarism includes information from books, newspapers, journals and the Internet. All work will be checked against specialist plagiarism software. You should be aware that University rules on plagiarism are strict and can result in failing the course and, at times, expulsion.