

# The American Political System

## POLS 241F, Fall 2015

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Class: M W 11:30 am - 12:50 pm, Harrison 12  
Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday 10 to 11:20; Wednesday 1 to 2

### Description

This course is an introduction to the American political system and to the scientific study of politics. The class focuses on the logic of our government's institutions and the consequences – both intended and unintended – of these institutions for the political behavior of individuals and groups in society. The primary goal of the course is to introduce you to a set of analytical tools that will sharpen your critical thinking skills and empower you to make sense of the political world. A vital part of this analytical toolbox is quantitative literacy — the ability to interpret and present data. Because this course satisfies the University's quantitative literacy requirement, approximately one-third of class time and of the course grade will involve the development of quantitative literacy.

### Learning Objectives

Course materials and exercises will contribute to the following five student learning outcomes for undergraduate Political Science majors:

- Define and explain political science concepts, theories, and approaches.
- Apply political science knowledge to contemporary political issues and problems and be able to identify and evaluate alternative political science-based solutions.
- Demonstrate skill in evidence-based reasoning from identifying the appropriate data or evidence necessary to construct convincing arguments and effectively communicate arguments. Identify appropriate methodology, design, and analysis for problems and understand ethical components of research choices.
- Formulate, propose and advocate possibilities for positive change in democratic society as engaged and informed citizens.

In-class exercises and a data project that students will develop throughout the semester will advance the following quantitative literacy learning outcomes:

- Identify the quantitative aspects of a problem or situation
- Interpret numerical displays and information
- Apply quantitative methods to unique and diverse situations
- Analyze, compare and/or contrast components of numerical information
- Communicate or create an idea with numeric information using multiple forms of representation (words, graphs, tables and other displays)
- Evaluate, assess, or critique different forms of numerical evidence

## Course Materials

You must bring a pen and paper to each class meeting. We will have in-class exercises that involve turning in written work.

Lowi, Ginsberg, Shepsle, and Ansolabehere. *American Government: Power and Purpose*, 13th Edition.

- Make sure to buy the 13th edition.

Additional **required** reading will be made available on the Canvas site for this class.

## Grading

Final course grades will be determined based on the following:

- Midterm Exam 1 (25 percent)
  - Tentatively scheduled for September 28
- Midterm Exam 2 (25 percent)
  - Tentatively scheduled for October 28
  - Midterm 2 will address material covered after midterm 1.
- Final Exam (25 percent)
  - Scheduled for December 9, 10:15 to 12:15.
  - The final exam will address all material covered in the course but will emphasize material covered after midterm 2.
- Data Analysis Project, submitted in 2 parts (15 percent total; part 1 is worth 5 percent and part 2 is worth 10 percent)
  - Project instructions will be distributed September 14.
  - Deadline for part 1: October 5 at the beginning of class.
    - \* Late assignments: 5 percentage point deduction if the assignment is not turned in at the beginning of class and for each additional day that the assignment is late an additional 5 percentage points will be deducted.
  - Deadline for part 2: November 2.
    - \* Late assignments: Same policy as above.
- Class participation (10 percent)
  - Attendance itself is not participation.
  - Points will be deducted from the participation grade for violating course policies or not obeying instructor requests.
  - The most important component of the participation grade will be participation in **in-class small group exercises** and completing the write-ups associated with those in-class exercises.

- The instructor reserves the right to administer in-class quizzes on assigned reading and incorporate those quiz scores into the class participation grade.

Material covered in *either* lecture *or* the assigned reading is fair game for inclusion on class examinations and quizzes.

## Grading Scale

A = 94-100, A- = 90-93,  
B+ = 87-89, B = 84-86, B- = 80-83  
C+ = 77-79, C = 74-76, C- = 70-73  
D+ = 67-69, D = 64-66, D- = 60-63  
F = Below 60

## Course Policies

- First and foremost, please be mindful that your behavior affects the learning experience of other students in the class. When you nap, surf the internet or talk in class, you are a distraction to other students and the instructor has an obligation to intervene.
  - Students are expected to be courteous and considerate of the instructor and one another. This consideration includes, but is not limited to, not engaging in activities that draw your attention away from class – including sleeping, texting, talking at inappropriate times, surfing the internet, reading, doing homework, listening to headphones, etc.
- **Attendance.** Class attendance is required.
  - If you miss class due to a medical emergency or due to a University-sanctioned excused absence, you **must promptly** provide written documentation from a medical doctor or from a university administrator if you want me to excuse the absence (and excuse you from that day's in-class exercises). Please don't bother to contact the instructor regarding excusing an absence without the appropriate written documentation.
  - Excused absences will not be granted for meetings of clubs, Greek organizations, or other extracurricular activities. So, for example, if the president summons you to the White House for a personal consultation, your absence would be understandable but nevertheless **not** excused.
  - Religious observances: If a religious observance will require your absence from class during the semester, you must notify the instructor in writing within the first two weeks of class that you are requesting an excused absence due to a religious observance. The instructor reserves the right to determine whether or not the request warrants an excused absence.
- **Quizzes.** The instructor reserves the right to administer in-class quizzes on assigned course material.
- **Computers and Cell Phones**
  - **Laptops.** Students are provisionally permitted to use their computers for course-related activities. However, the instructor reserves the right to ban laptop use during lecture for **any reason**. In particular, laptop use will be banned if the stipulation that laptops are used only for course-related activities is violated. **The instructor has no interest in policing computer use, so either the entire class will have laptop use privileges or nobody will.**

- **Cell Phones.** Students are not to access their cell phones during class – even for the purpose of taking notes.
- **Posting slides and handouts.** Power Point slides shown in lecture will not be posted online, and in order to encourage lecture attendance, in-class handouts will generally not be posted online.
- **Grade disputes.** I will not discuss grade disputes in person, via email, or on the telephone. Requests for a grade change must be made in writing within seven days of the date when the graded assignment was returned in class. The written request should explain the specific reasons for the dispute and must be accompanied by the original assignment in its entirety. A hard copy of both the written request and the original assignment must be delivered to the instructor. Note that when an assignment is re-graded, the entire assignment is regraded, not just the component under dispute.
- Grade changes of any kind will not be considered after final grades are reported the Registrar's Office.
- **University policy on academic dishonesty.** Any form of cheating or plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students are expected to familiarize themselves with the sections of the Miami University Student Handbook addressing academic dishonesty.

### Contacting the Professor

Email is the best way to get in contact with me. In general, you can expect that I will respond within 24 hours to email messages sent during business hours and on the next business day to email messages sent during weekends and holidays. Though you will likely get a response sooner, you should plan according to these parameters.

All students are invited and encouraged to visit office hours.

### Course Topics and Schedule

**Note:** The instructor reserves the right to alter readings and dates contained in this syllabus.

Each reading assignment listed below should be completed before the first class meeting in which that assignment is scheduled to be discussed.

- August 24: Introductions
- August 26: Principles of Politics
  - Audio: *This American Life*, “A not-so-simple majority.” (60 minutes)
    - \* Be prepared to discuss in class on August 26.
    - \* If you would like the transcript, it is available at: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/534/a-not-so-simple-majority>
  - Lowi Ch 1
    - \* This is a required reading assignment but you don't have to complete it by August 26.
- August 31 and September 2: Public Opinion
  - Lowi Ch 10

- September 7: Labor Day (No class)
- September 9: Elections
  - Lowi Ch 11
- September 14: The Empirical Study of Human Behavior
  - Paul and Weinbach, “The uncertainty of outcome and scoring effects on Nielson ratings for Monday Night Football” (posted on Canvas)
  - **Data Project instructions distributed**
- September 16: The Rules of Inference
  - Epstein and King, “The Rules of Inference” (posted on Canvas)
- September 21 and 23: Political Parties
  - Lowi Ch 12
- September 28: **Midterm 1**
- September 30: Groups and Interests
  - Lowi Ch 13
- October 5 and 7: The Media
  - Lowi Ch 14
  - **Part 1 of Data Project due at the beginning of class on Oct 5**
- October 12 and 14: Congress
  - Lowi Ch 6
- October 19: The Presidency
  - Lowi Ch 7
- October 21: The Bureaucracy
  - Lowi Ch 8
- October 26: The Federal Courts
  - Lowi Ch 9
- October 28: **Midterm 2**
- November 2 and 4: Student Data Project Presentations and Discussions
  - **Part 2 of Data Project due the beginning of class on November 2.**
- November 9 and 11: The Founding and the Constitution
  - Lowi Ch 2
- November 16 and 18: Federalism and the Separation of Powers

- Lowi Ch 3
- November 23: The American System in Comparative Perspective
  - Brief and timely reading item to be posted on Canvas.
- November 25: Thanksgiving Break (No Class)
- November 30: Civil Liberties
  - Lowi Ch 4
- December 2: Civil Rights
  - Lowi Ch 5
- December 9: Final Exam (10:15 to 12:15)