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PO 111: INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POLITICS

Summer Semester I (20 May-30 June 2014)

Class time: Tuesdays, Thursdays 6:00 PM-9:30 PM, CAS B-06B

Office hours: Tuesdays 12 PM-3 PM, or by appointment

This course will provide you with the intellectual foundations necessary to understand the American political system and help you to develop your own informed opinions about its efficacy. Each class session, we will explore a different facet of American politics, from a culture of “exceptionalism” to policymaking institutions to political campaigns to the role of race and gender in US political life, and make sense of some of the biggest puzzles of American political life. Why are Americans more ideologically divided now than they were 30 years ago? Why is there such apparent gridlock and stalemate in government? (Is this normal, or has it gotten worse over the years?) Why do politicians continue to deploy negative advertising in political campaigns when evidence shows that voters are turned off by such tactics? Is there room for a viable third party in America? Why do the vast majority of Americans believe they live under the best system of government in the world, and yet the most recent opinion polls show Congress’s approval rating at 15%; the president’s at 41%; and the Supreme Court’s at 46%? Why does America have a smaller welfare state than European countries? Why has the presidency often been called both the weakest *and* the strongest branch of government? We will address these and many other questions over the course of the summer term and, at the end of our time together, I hope to have instilled in you some of the skills necessary for the rest of your university education and possibly for a career in politics: how our political system works and why; how to read, deconstruct and write an academic research paper; how to methodologically assess important social science questions and solve political puzzles; and, most importantly, how to *critically analyze* the most critical political issues of the day. This course is meant to challenge you, but it’s also meant to excite you about the American political system—a system that these days seems to command anything but excitement. If you’re having trouble with any aspect of the course, in any way, don’t hesitate to come talk to me during office hours or by email. I’ll try to stick to a 24-hour response time with emails, so if you don’t hear from me within 24 hours, it’s because I somehow missed the email. Write again.

COURSE MATERIAL:

We will be working primarily from the following textbook:

Kernell, Samuel, Gary C. Jacobson, Thad Kousser and Lynn Vavreck
The Logic of American Politics, 6th edition
Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2014

All textbook chapters and supplementary course readings will be made available on the Blackboard course site, as indicated by the [BB] designation on the schedule. There will be approximately 100 pages of reading *per class session*. Since classes are held on Tuesdays and Thursdays, this may mean a lot of busy Wednesday nights. Please try your best to do all of the assigned readings; if I get the sense that students have *consistently* been neglecting the reading, I'll start administering quizzes at the beginning of each class.

GRADING:

Your grade for this course will be based on the following criteria:

- **In-Class Participation (15%):** This course is small enough to foster the kind of in-depth discussions that are not only intellectually and academically beneficial, but are certainly much more engaging than listening to me lecture at you for 7 hours a week. Active participation is crucial for doing well in this course. I understand viscerally that certain students may be shyer than others, and I encourage you to come talk to me if you feel you're unable to speak your mind or ask necessary questions in class. Also remember, you will be assessed not based on the amount you speak but on the quality of your contributions. Try not to miss class; this is a condensed semester and even one absence can be critical in terms of keeping up with the workload. If you do have to miss more than one class for whatever reason, I'll probably ask that you send me a few pages of comments/responses to that session's reading.
- **Response Papers (15% each):** Throughout the course of the semester, you will write three short papers (approximately 5 pages each, double-spaced) critically responding to a selected session's assigned readings. Be prepared to present your thoughts to the rest of the class. (To be clear, you will not be graded on your presentation, but rather on the paper itself.) The course is organized according to the major themes/topics of American politics; select three of these topics that most interest you, and reflect upon them, drawing on that session's readings and on outside sources if necessary. For example, for Congress, you may choose to write about why Congress has such low approval ratings and is held in such low esteem by the American public, or why members of Congress have become more ideologically extreme, or what members of Congress should do to combat their bad reputation and increase the chamber's credibility with the American people. These papers will be due one week after the class session on your chosen topic.
- **Opinion Piece (15%):** This assignment is meant to be a fun writing exercise that draws on your knowledge of the US political system to tackle some of the pressing issues of the day. Pretend you've been assigned to write an op-Ed column for a major newspaper on a topic of your choice: Why the electoral college should be abolished, say; or why marijuana should be legalized at the federal level; or why Supreme Court justices should be elected; or why Obamacare will

destroy America. Be creative and write about whatever interests you, regardless of whether we've covered it in the course yet or not, and take whatever position you want. Just be sure to ground your position in the structural realities of the American system and make an informed case. If you need inspiration, peruse *The New York Times'* op-Ed page [<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion/>], as well as the biweekly columns of writers like David Brooks, Thomas Friedman and Paul Krugman. Your piece should be around 750 words, and will be due at the beginning of class on Tuesday, 10 June.

- **Final Exam (25%):** The exam will be short-answer and essay format; no multiple choice. If you do the readings and come to class, you'll be fine. The exam is meant to assess your basic understanding of the material discussed throughout the course, not to trip you up. There won't be any "gotcha" questions; if something is important enough to be on the exam, we'll have mentioned it in class. You'll have approximately two hours to complete the exam.

Finally, you should familiarize yourself with Boston University College of Arts and Science's plagiarism policy: <http://www.bu.edu/academics/resources/academic-conduct-code/>. I'm sure I don't need to say this, but don't plagiarize, and don't cheat; it's not worth it, and I assure you I'll be able to tell. If you think you're going to be late on an assignment, tell me and we'll work something out. I'm not a stickler for deadlines; I'd rather you do a better job and hand the paper in a day or two late. That said, absent any sort of personal discussion/agreement, you'll be docked 1/3 of a grade (e.g., from an A to an A-, or an A- to a B+) for every day that an assignment is late.

COURSE SCHEDULE:

Tuesday, 20 May 2014:

Introduction to Political Science; Constitutional Structure; and Political Culture in America

- Nicholas Kristof, "Professors, We Need You!" *The New York Times* (2014); [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/opinion/sunday/kristof-professors-we-need-you.html?_r=0]
- Greg Marx, "Embrace the Wonk," *Columbia Journalism Review* (2010); [http://www.cjr.org/feature/embrace_the_wonk_1.php?page=all]
- Christopher Beam, "The Only Politics Article You'll Ever Have to Read," *Slate* (2010); [http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/low_concept/2010/06/the_only_politics_article_youll_ever_have_to_read.single.html]
- (Re)read the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights (1789)
- The *Articles of Confederation* (1781); [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/artconf.asp]

Thursday, 22 May 2014:

Congress and Republican Representation

- *The Logic of American Politics*, chapter 6 [BB]
- George Packer, "The Empty Chamber," *The New Yorker* (2010) [BB]

- David Mayhew, “Actions in the Public Sphere,” in *The Legislative Branch*, eds. Quirk and Binder (2005) [BB]
- Richard Fenno, “US House Members in Their Constituencies: An Exploration,” *American Political Science Review* (1977) [BB]

Tuesday, 27 May 2014:

The Presidency

- *The Logic of American Politics*, chapter 7 [BB]
- Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (1960), chapter 3 [BB]
- From: Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (1997) [BB]
- David Remnick, “Going the Distance,” *The New Yorker* (2014) [BB]

Thursday, 29 May 2014:

The Courts

- *The Logic of American Politics*, chapter 9 [BB]
- *Federalist* 78 [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed78.asp]
- From: Antonin Scalia, *A Matter of Interpretation: Federal Courts and the Law* (1997) [BB]
- From: Stephen Breyer, *Active Liberty* (2005) [BB]

Tuesday, 3 June 2014:

The Bureaucracy

- *The Logic of American Politics*, chapter 8 [BB]
- David Lewis, *The Politics of Presidential Appointments* (2008), chapter 6 [BB]

Thursday, 5 June 2014:

Inter-Institutional Dynamics; The American Welfare State

- Keith Whittington, *Constitutional Construction: Divided Powers and Constitutional Meaning* (1999), chapter 5 [BB]
- Sean Beienburg, “Contesting the US Constitution through State Amendments: The 2011 and 2012 Elections,” *Political Science Quarterly* (2014) [BB]
- Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, chapter 2 [BB]
- Theda Skocpol, “America’s First Social Security System: The Expansion of Benefits for Civil War Veterans,” *Political Science Quarterly* (1993) [BB]

Tuesday, 10 June 2014:

The Media

- *The Logic of American Politics*, chapter 14 [BB]
- Thomas Patterson, *Out of Order* (1993), chapters 1-2 [BB]
- From: Timothy Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus* (1973) [BB]

Thursday, 12 June 2014:

Public Opinion

- *The Logic of American Politics*, chapter 10 [BB]
- Angus Campbell, et al., *The American Voter* (1960), chapters 6 and 8 [BB]
- Samuel Popkin, “Information Shortcuts and the Reasoning Voter” in *Information, Participation and Choice: An Economic Theory of Democracy in Perspective*, ed. Bernard Grofman (1993) [BB]

Tuesday, 17 June 2014:

Political Campaigns and Elections; and Voter Behavior

- *The Logic of American Politics*, chapter 11 [BB]
- **From:** Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate* (1997) [BB]
- **From:** Andrew Gelman, *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State* (2010) [BB]
- **Watch:** “Daisy” (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1964/peace-little-girl-daisy>); “3 AM” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yr7odFUARg>); “Celeb” (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2008/celeb>)

Thursday, 19 June 2014:

Race and Gender in American Politics

- Donald Green, et al., *Partisan Hearts and Minds* (2002), chapter 6 [BB]
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Fear of a Black President,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (2012) [BB]
- **From:** Richard Thompson Ford, *The Race Card* (2008) [BB]
- Jane Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (1986), chapters 1-2 [BB]
- **Watch:** “Weekend Passes” (<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1988/willie-horton>);

Tuesday, 24 June 2014:

Interest Groups and Money in American Politics

- *The Logic of American Politics*, chapter 13 [BB]
- Richard Hall and Frank Wayman, “Buying Time: Moneyed Interests and the Mobilization of Bias in Congressional Committees,” *American Political Science Review* (1990) [BB]
- Jeffrey Toobin, “Money Unlimited,” *The New Yorker* (2012) [BB]
- **Watch:** “Harry and Louise” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dt31nhleeCg>)

Thursday, 26 June 2014:

Wrap-Up and Final Exam