

**Sam Houston State University
Department of Political Science**

POLS 2305: American Government (Spring 2018)

Instructor: Prof. Jonathan Brown

Office: CHSS 487

Office Hours: TU/TH 2:30 – 3:30 PM or by appointment.

Course Time & Location: TU/TH 11:00 AM – 12:20 PM in CHSS C070.

Credit Hours: 3

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“Among the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction....By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”

– James Madison, 1787¹

“If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls would be necessary.”

– James Madison, 1788²

“All will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal law must protect, and to violate would be oppression. Let us, then, fellow-citizens, unite with one heart and one mind....Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.”

– Thomas Jefferson, 1801³

“Men are rather reasoning than reasonable animals, for the most part governed by their passion.”

– Alexander Hamilton, 1802⁴

“America is an idea, America is an ideal, America is a vision.”

– Woodrow Wilson, 1910⁵

Course Description & Objectives

This course offers an introduction to American government and a broad overview of how our political system operates. Its primary objective is to examine how political scientists approach the study of American government and politics. This involves moving beyond mere description of our governmental system by employing a theoretical framework designed to analyze and explain American political behavior and outcomes in terms of the “Five *Is*”: the *Individuals* involved; their respective *Interests*; the nature of their *Interactions*; the *Institutions* that structure those interactions; and the development of these elements over *Time*.

¹ Publius, “The Federalist No. 10.”

² Publius, “The Federalist No. 51.”

³ Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012), pp. 348-349.

⁴ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), pp. 658-659.

⁵ A. Scott Berg, *Wilson* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2013), p. 201.

General Learning Objectives

This course has the following three general learning objectives:

1. Gaining factual knowledge (terminology, classification, methods, and trends) about American governmental institutions, political behavior, and civic engagement.
2. Gaining analytical knowledge about fundamental principles, generalizations, theories, and philosophical foundations of political behavior in the United States.
3. Gaining knowledge of civic responsibility to engage effectively in American democracy.

Course Readings

There is one required book: Theodore Lowi, et al., *American Government: Power & Purpose* (Core 14th Ed., New York: Norton, 2017). It is available through the University Bookstore.

Any additional outside readings listed on the syllabus are available through this course's Blackboard page in the section titled Course Materials.

It is important to note that course readings should be done *before* the class they are listed for in the schedule below as we will discuss them in class that day. The average required reading load per class meeting across the entire semester is only 21 pages. Some class meetings require more than this average load, some less, and some none at all (i.e., days when we are viewing a film or reviewing for an exam). Students who keep up with the reading in a timely manner will get more out of each class meeting and do better in the overall course than students who do not.

Course Requirements & Grading

Your final course grade will be based on the following four components:

- 10% of your overall grade is based on attendance.
- 30% of your overall grade is based on the first in-class exam (Tues., 2/20).
- 30% of your overall grade is based on the second in-class exam (Thurs., 3/29).
- 30% of your overall grade is based on the third in-class exam (Thurs., 5/3).

There will be one extra credit opportunity that will be discussed and handed out on Tues., 4/17. It will be worth five percentage points (i.e., half a letter grade) and due on Thurs., 4/26.

The grading scale that will be used in this course is as follows:

- 90-100 = A
- 80-89 = B
- 70-79 = C
- 60-69 = D
- 0-59 = F

As a general rule, I do not round up grades (i.e., an 89.9 is a B, not an A).

Attendance

Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class meeting. As a general rule, there are no excused absences from this class, except for those related to religious holidays (see statement below) and required university-sponsored events. Thus, you do not have to e-mail or otherwise contact me every time you miss class. Of course, I understand that students get sick and occasionally miss class for other important reasons. As such, up to three absences will not be penalized. Additional absences will result in a proportional lowering of your grade in this area.

Exams, Exam Dates, and Make-Up Exams

There are three noncumulative exams in this course, each of which will cover the course readings and in-class lectures and discussions for the relevant portion of the course. Some of my lectures might follow the readings closely. Others will have a more indirect connection to the readings. Students are responsible for all material covered in the course whether it comes from the readings or from our classroom sessions.

While we may occasionally diverge from some of the lecture and class discussion topics listed on the syllabus, the exam dates listed below are *permanently fixed and will not be changed*. Please do not ask me to reschedule any of the exams.

Make-up exams will *only* be given to students with a valid excuse who give me prior notification that they will not be at the regularly-scheduled exam. Unless you are literally on your death bed, you can send me an e-mail ahead of time.

Classroom Expectations

I expect all students to behave professionally in this class. As such, I expect all students who attend class to arrive and be ready to start on time. During class, please refrain from all disruptive behavior, including (but not limited to) reading newspapers, sleeping, talking during lecture, using your cell phone, checking your email, surfing the internet, and insulting fellow classmates or the instructor. Any of this or similar behavior will result in a lowering of your participation grade. Of course, I understand that you have lives and issues that may require immediate attention. Accordingly, if something important arises and you need to send or receive a phone call, text message, etc., please simply remove yourself from the class momentarily and take care of the issue.

If you miss a class meeting, you are still responsible for the information covered. I will not provide you with my notes, nor will the Graduate Teaching Assistant. Instead, you are encouraged to discuss the missed material with one your fellow students or with me during my office hours.

University Policies

Sam Houston State University's policies on academic dishonesty, religious holidays, students with disabilities, and visitors in the classroom are available at: <http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus/>. For policies pertaining to Services for Students with Disabilities, please see: www.shsu.edu/dept/disability/.

Student Counseling Services

A recent American College Health Survey found stress, sleep problems, anxiety, depression, interpersonal concerns, death of a significant other and alcohol use among the top ten health impediments to academic performance. Students experiencing personal problems or situational crises during the semester are encouraged to contact the SHSU Counseling Center for assistance, support and advocacy. This service is free and confidential. The center is located in the new Student Health & Counseling Center. Ph. (936)-294-1720.

Student Veterans

The Veterans Resource Center serves SHSU students who have served the country and assist them with their transition into university life at SHSU. First Floor of Academic Building III; (936)-294-1046.

Class Schedule & Readings

Please note that the following is a tentative schedule, subject to change as needed.

TH (1/18): Introduction to the Course – The Five Is

Required Reading:

None.

TU (1/23): Introduction to Political Science – Theory & Evidence....& Scandal

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 1 (pp. 2-6, 24-29).

Bianco, pp. 3-4 (on Blackboard).

Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, pp. ix-xxii (on Blackboard).

Sarah Kaplan, 2/8/16, "FBI arrests nearly all of the top officials of Crystal City, Tex.," *Washington Post*. (available online)

SECTION I: FOUNDATIONS – HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL

TH (1/25): The Puzzle of American Politics – *E Pluribus Unum*?

Required Reading:

Ellis, pp. 3-19 (on Blackboard).

Film: PBS, *The Duel*.

Optional Reading (on Blackboard):

Ellis, pp. 20-47.

Abramowitz & Saunders, pp. 542-554.

Woodward, pp. 1-4.

TU (1/30): The Possibility of Individual Rationality – The Primacy of Preferences

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 1 (pp. 6-9).
Bianco, pp. 4-11 (on Blackboard).

Optional Reading (on Blackboard):

Shepsle, pp.13-18, 20-35.

TH (2/1): Why Institutions Matter – The Problem of Preference Diversity & the Power of Procedure

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 1 (pp. 9-12, 18-19).
Bianco, pp. 11-13, 16-28, 30-35 (on Blackboard).
Chiqui Esteban and Dan Keating, 11/7/16, “Hate our electoral system? Here’s who could have been president under other setups,” *Washington Post*. (available online).

Optional Reading (on Blackboard):

Shepsle, pp. 191-197.

TU (2/6): Strategic Behavior – How We Got Here Matters

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 1 (pp. 19-21), Chapter 6 (pp. 218-220), and Chapter 7 (pp. 249-253).
Bianco, pp. 147-159 (on Blackboard).

Film: An illustration of strategic behavior from the film *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*.

TH (2/8): Collective Action – Three Solutions

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 1 (pp. 12-17) and Chapter 13 (pp. 538-555).
Bianco, pp. 36-52 (on Blackboard).

TU (2/13): The Foundings

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 2 (pp. 30-69).

TH (2/15): Flex Day/Study Day

**In-class review session.

TU (2/20): First In-class Exam

SECTION II: INSTITUTIONS – DIVIDED AND BALANCED

TH (2/22): Federalism and Separation of Powers

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 3 (pp. 72-100).

Film: PBS, *Constitution USA: A More Perfect Union*.

TU (2/27): The Congress

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 6 (pp. 182-215, 222-237).

Film: NBC, “Taking the Hill: Inside Congress”

TH (3/1): The Presidency

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 7 (pp. 240-288).

Film: NBC, “Inside the Real West Wing”

TU (3/6) & TH (3/8): Chicken & Brinksmanship – Explaining Government Shutdown

Required Reading (available online):

Marlow Stern, 10/2/13, “‘The West Wing’ Government Shutdown Episode is Frightening Familiar,” *The Daily Beast*.

Dylan Matthews, 10/4/13, “How a game theorist would solve the shutdown showdown,” *The Washington Post* Wonkblog.

Steve Inskeep & Shankar Vedantam, 10/8/13, “Theorists Compare Government Shutdown to a Not-So-Fun Game,” National Public Radio.

Igor Bobic, 3/12/15, “White House Considered Sending Obama to the Hill During Shutdown, ‘West Wing’ Style,” *Huffington Post*.

Film: An illustration of Chicken from the TV series *The West Wing* – Season 5, Episodes 7-8.

TU (3/13) & TH (3/15): No Class....Enjoy Spring Break!

TU (3/20): The Judiciary

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 9 (pp. 328-351, 360-374).

Alana Abramson, 2/27/17, “Here’s How One Senator Plans to Get Merrick Garland on the Supreme Court,” *TIME*. (available online)

Film: *The West Wing* – Season 5, Episode 17.

TH (3/22): Checks & Balances in Action: U.S. v. Nixon (...and Trump?)

Required Reading (available online):

Suzanne Garment, 10/21/17, “Sorry Liberals: The Russia Investigations Aren’t Watergate,” *NBC News*.

Jeff Greenfield, 12/13/17, “Why the Russia Scandal is Nothing Like Watergate,” *Politico*.

Film: CNN, “The Seventies: The United States vs. Richard Nixon”

TU (3/27): Flex Day/Study Day

**In-class review session.

TH (3/29): Second In-class Exam

SECTION III: BEHAVIOR – ACTIONS, INTERESTS, RIGHTS

TU (4/3) & TH (4/5): No Class....Prof. Brown is attending a conference in San Francisco.

TU (4/10): Elections

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 11 (pp. 426-452).

Film: Start *Electoral Dysfunction*.

TH (4/12): Voters

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 11 (pp. 455-469).

Bianco, pp. 67-75 (on Blackboard).

Film: Finish *Electoral Dysfunction*.

TU (4/17) & TH (4/19): Candidates and Political Motivations

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 11 (pp. 478-488).

Film: An illustration of candidate motivations from *Parks and Recreation* – Season 4, Ep. 20.

Film: PBS, *The Choice 2016*.

Extra credit opportunity handed out

TU (4/24): Political Parties

There will be no in-person class meeting today. Instead, the lecture materials are posted on Blackboard.

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 12 (pp. 490-506, 533-537).

TH (4/26): Civil Liberties

Required Reading:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 4 (pp. 102-143).

Film: PBS, *Constitution USA: It's a Free Country*.

****Extra credit opportunity due****

TU (5/1): Flex Day/Study Day

****In-class review session.**

TH (5/3): Third In-class Exam