

POSC 109
THE U.S. POLITICAL SYSTEM
FALL 2015
(Draft, August 11, 2015)

Monday/Wednesday/Friday
10:30 a.m. – 11:20 a.m.
Classroom TBD
Office Hours MW 1:00 – 2:30 p.m.

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PURPOSES OF THIS COURSE:

The purpose of this course is to provide a sophisticated overview of American political institutions. It is my version of an introductory American Government, or American Politics, course. Government and politics are not exactly the same topic, and the goal of the course is to help you learn about both.

In the study of politics there are no natural laws. There are general patterns, more like probability statements, which can be applied (somewhat) to understand particular cases. So the main task of a course is to give students the understanding that they can use to try to make sense of particular cases. Among the cases we will look at in some depth are prohibition, the federal budget, and the battle over expanding health insurance to more Americans.

In addition, we will think together throughout this course about a broader theme: how well the U.S. political system manages and structures conflict, and with what effects. One goal for political systems is to take the conflict that naturally exists in society and channel it in a constructive way. By “constructive” I mean a way that enables people to live together in complex societies in a way that meets some standards of decency and justice. This is made more difficult, naturally, by the fact that people disagree about what those standards might be. But in healthy systems the vast majority of people think the result is close enough to their personal standards, even if they have different standards. We might call that compromise.

Yet systems break. Officially, the U.S. political system has continued since 1787. In reality, it collapsed in 1861 and had to be re-founded, with similar institutions but different meanings, after an extremely bloody war. Yet since the ratification of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, the U.S. has seemed much more stable than most other advanced industrial nations. It survived the Great Depression, in particular, without turning towards either fascism or communism.

Much of U.S. political science especially in the 1950s and 1960s, therefore, sought to identify the sources of stability that limited conflict in U.S. politics. Somehow, Americans managed to compromise and live together. Yet that may be coming to an end. In 2012 two of the most senior “establishment” talking heads about U.S. politics, Tom Mann and Norm Ornstein, published a book titled, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*. Therefore one goal of this course is to build towards reading Mann and Ornstein's book, so that you will understand why they see the system as having changed in fundamental and scary ways; how that fits with standard interpretations of U.S. politics; and so come to your own judgment about

whether the current situation is as worrisome as they believe, or what more you would want to know so as to form your own conclusion.

Most "intro American" courses use a textbook, simply to make sure not too much important material is left out of an overview. The textbook by Turner, Stephenson et al. that I have assigned does a pretty good job of providing that material, in a sensible manner. It also is offered in a form (looseleaf pages plus an e-book) that is much less expensive than the norm. So I hope you will find that helpful.

One of the advantages of this text is that it does not emphasize overall "themes" such as which of three political science theories best describes the "system" (yawn). But I do research and analysis on some of the topics of this course, and have my own views about many of the typical topics for textbook chapters. Therefore I have created a somewhat parallel text, consisting of articles I have written in the past or chapters I have devised specifically for this course. It provides further analysis of some topics covered in the textbook, and coverage of some aspects of American politics that do not receive as much attention in the textbook. In addition, supplementary readings will address some core analytic questions about the system.

In order to understand the behavior and outputs of the American political system, you need to understand both the interests and attitudes represented in politics, and the opportunities and constraints created by structure. The American political system is an **interaction between political structures (“the system”) and political beliefs**. The rules for making decisions (the system) structure whose beliefs affect what the government does, how much. The structures also influence beliefs, because they help determine which ideas get attention and they also affect beliefs about government itself. A system designed to frustrate action may frustrate citizens as well. But beliefs also influence structure, because one thing that political combatants do is try to change the rules to favor their sides. The Constitution itself is an example of that kind of politics.

COURSE READING MATERIAL

You should obtain three books for this course:

Charles C. Turner, D. Grier Stephenson Jr., Robert J. Bresler, Robert J. Friedrich and Joseph J. Karlesky, *Introduction to American Government* 7th ed. Redding, CA: BVT Publishing, 2014. "Textbook Plus" edition.

This is a basic source for facts about and some explanation of the system.

Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*. Basic Books, 2012.

This critique of current politics has received a great deal of attention among scholars and the press.

Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*. New York: Scribner, 2010.

The story of how Prohibition was enacted is seen by many political scientists as a classic example of interest group mobilization and power, in which the tactics look very, very familiar a hundred years later. That is true, but I think it looks familiar in many other ways. So one reason we will

read this book is to give you stories to which we can refer in discussing how various parts of the system, such as Congress and the courts and parties and the bureaucracy, work. Another is to give you perhaps the classic, but by no means an isolated, example of the challenges of government – why "public policy" is not simply a matter of deciding on a goal and passing a law saying the nation should achieve that goal. In public policy analysis terms, legislation does not ensure implementation. Last, it's just a good story, engaging the full range of reasons to care about politics and government.

Other required readings will be posted on the course blackboard site. A few readings might be available on public websites. If there is student interest, I will prepare a reader consisting of the readings of which I am author or co-author.

GRADED ASSIGNMENTS

The written assignments for this course will consist of four essays.

Each will be a response to some aspects of the reading. Three will be completed during the course; the other will function as a take-home final exam.

Each of the first three papers will count for 20 percent of your grade. Each should be between 1500 and 2000 words long.

Essay 1, Sept 21. This course begins with some introductory readings. We then will read Daniel Okrent's book about Prohibition. This essay will require you to relate the Okrent book to the themes of the introductory readings.

Essay 2, Oct 16. This essay will ask you to write about the role of parties and the divisions between the parties in American politics. I have not crafted the specific topic. But, as we study the material during these weeks, some things you might consider are:

What are the differences in beliefs between the Republicans and Democrats?

What is the alternative to having decisions made in part as a conflict between parties? So, what would "nonpartisan" decision-making look like?

What is the relationship between the parties and the public? Do parties help represent public sentiment, misrepresent public sentiment, or is the question misguided?

If you are dissatisfied, are you sure your complaint is not just that your side isn't winning?

Essay 3, Nov 23. This essay will involve the separation of powers and its effects on government decisions. It may ask you to include the relative importance of structure and ideas.

Final Essay Exam, Dec 8. *The final take-home essay exam will count for 30 percent of your grade.* You will be asked to write two essays, of between 1200 and 1500 words each. You will be able to choose your two topics from three questions.

The final ten percent of your grade will be determined by class participation. The participation portion of the grade is meant to reward contributions to discussion and encourage class attendance. "Contributions" can easily include good questions, not just answers. Nor are students expected to hit the mark in everything they say – that's my job, and even I may not manage it!

I understand that conflicts arise which may make it sensible not to attend class. For example, there may be religious obligations, which I understand fully because I am Jewish and both Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur conflict with this class this semester. I apologize for the fact that I will miss class on those days. I also know that I need to be at a conference on Sept 4 (the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association). And, my daughter is starting college this year and we will be driving back on August 31 after dropping her off, and visiting her for parents' weekend on October 16.

Therefore, in addition to my regular office hours, I will schedule some extra time during which students who would like to come and talk about the readings assigned on days when I must miss class can come do so.

Students who need to miss class due to such conflicts – e.g. religion, sports teams, or conflict with other work – should let me know, in writing, and with documentation where appropriate. So, for example, if you have a team that is traveling, it is normal for coaches to provide notes explaining the fact. Conflict with other work does not mean, “I was behind in another class that I think is more important.” Managing your time so that doesn’t happen is part of your job. There are occasional situations, however, when a student needs to travel for research or a presentation, just like professors do. I would not want to interfere with that kind of opportunity. Please also inform me if you are ill. If you are sick enough to have to inform me that you missed class due to illness more than twice in a row, you should go to the health service, get looked at, and then bring me a note from them.

Although there are legitimate reasons to miss class, it’s best to miss as little as possible. I will take attendance, and, if a student misses more than nine sessions of class without proper explanation, that can be a reason to reduce the participation grade.

No person can lose points by participating in class – unless they are abusive or disruptive. The participation portion could only lower your grade, compared to your performance on written work, if your attendance is poor. If your participation is good, that can be a reason to raise your average from your written work a bit, and so (sometimes) over the borderline between two letter grades.

COURSE PROCEDURES AND EXPECTATIONS

All written assignments will be penalized half a grade for each day they are late. Students who have a reason for delay that could be anticipated in advance must inform me in advance, if they wish to seek an exception to the penalty. Students who face unanticipated emergencies must document the emergency and inform me as soon as possible, if they wish to seek an exception. I will judge each case on its merits.

You must document all sources you use in writing your papers according to an accepted style guide. A good standard approach is in the Chicago Manual of Style (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), but any standard format will be fine for this class. Plagiarism of any form will be punished by referral to the appropriate university judicial proceedings, as well as by a failing grade in the assignment on which the plagiarism occurs. Plagiarism includes, according to the MLA Handbook (New York: MLA, 1988), two related activities: repeating “as your own someone else’s sentences, more or less

verbatim,” and “paraphrasing another person’s argument as your own, and presenting another’s line of thinking as though it were your own.” Proper citation of sources will allow you to incorporate others’ analyses without committing plagiarism.

POSC 109 Fall 2012, Professor White
SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND ASSIGNMENTS

Part I: The Basics

- Aug 24 Introduction to the class.
Some of the perspectives I introduce can be reviewed in a manuscript posted on Blackboard, titled "Politics and Government"
- Aug 26 Readings from E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (1960): Preface, pp. vii-viii; Chapter 1, “The Contagiousness of Conflict,” pp. 1-19; Chapter 4, “The Displacement of Conflicts,” pages pp. 62-77.
- Aug 28 Textbook: Introduction and Chapter 1, "The Constitution of the United States," 1-45
- Aug 31 **No Class** – but please read Federalist Papers 10, 51, 62 and 63. They can be downloaded from many sources; I suggest http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/fed.asp
- Sept 2 Textbook Chapter 3, "Civil Liberties and Civil Rights," 81-121
- Sept 4 No reading assigned
I will be at a conference on this day, so there will be no class unless I find someone to show portions of the PBS Ken Burns documentary on Prohibition

Part II: Prohibition – Why It Happened and How It Worked

- Sept 7 **No Class, Labor Day**
- Sept 9 *Last Call*: Prologue, Part I, and Chapter 8
- Sept 11 Textbook Chapter 2, "Federalism: States in the Union," 46-79
- Sept 14 *Last Call*: Chapters 9-14
This day is Rosh HaShanah so, unless I find a substitute instructor, there will be no class. But I might manage to find someone to show portions of the PBS Ken Burns documentary on Prohibition.
- Sept 16 *Last Call*: Part III.

Constitution Day Program on "Sexual Misconduct on College Campuses: Issues of Due Process" 4:30
today, Moot Court Room,
School of Law

- Sept 18 *Last Call: Part IV and Epilogue*
- Sept 21 **First Essay Assignment Due**
 Topic: In your view, what does the Prohibition story tell us about how Schattschneider's analysis plays out in practice; about how well Madison's "controlling the mischiefs of faction" worked out; and about the sources of power and influence in American politics?
 Discussion of topic in class
- Sept 23 **No Class, Yom Kippur**
- Part III: Beliefs and How They Are Organized***
- Sept 25 Textbook Chapter 4, "Political Ideologies"
 2012 Republican Party Platform, at <https://cdn.gop.com/docs/2012GOPPlatform.pdf>
- Sept 28 J. White, "The Politics of Belief and U.S. Health Reform"
 2012 Democratic Party Platform, at
http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/papers_pdf/101962.pdf
- Sept 30 J. White, "Political Parties Text"
- Oct 2 Matt Grossman and David A. Hopkins, "Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* Vol. 13, No. 1 (March, 2015) pp. 119 – 139.
- Oct 5 Textbook Chapter 7, "Interest Groups and Political Parties"
- Oct 7 J. White, "Interests Text"
- Oct 9 Textbook Chapter 5, "Public Opinion and Political Participation"
- Oct 12 Textbook Chapter 6, "Politics and the Media."
- Oct 14 Review Discussion
 Topic for second essay assignment will be handed out at end of class
- Oct 16 **No Class**
Second Essay Assignment Due to Professor White by e-mail by 5 p.m.
- Oct 19 **FALL BREAK**
- Part IV: Decision-Making Processes***
- Oct 21 Textbook Chapter 8, "Campaigns and Elections"

- Oct 23 Something further on elections
- Oct 26 Textbook Chapter 9, “Congress”
- Oct 28 J. White, “Congress Text”
- Oct 30 Textbook Chapter 10, “The Presidency”
- Nov 2 J. White, “Presidency Text”
- Nov 4 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Policy Basics: Introduction to the Federal Budget Process.” At <http://www.cbpp.org/research/policy-basics-introduction-to-the->
J. White, “Presidents, Congress, and Budget Decisions,” Chapter 9 in James A. Thurber ed., *Rivals for Power: Presidential-Congressional Relations 5th ed.*
- Nov 6 Textbook Chapter 12, “The Supreme Court and American Judiciary”
- Nov 9 J. White, “Judicial Branch Text”
Timothy S. Jost, blog post about *King v. Burwell*
<http://healthaffairs.org/blog/2015/06/25/implementing-health-reform-the-supreme-court-upholds-tax-credits-in-the-federal-exchange/>
I may add one or two other reports on recent decisions.
- Nov 11. Textbook Chapter 11, “Bureaucracies”
- Nov 13 J. White, “Agencies Text”
- Nov 16 Textbook Chapter 13, “Government and Public Policy”
- Nov 18 J. White, "My Health Policy Nightmare," *Health Matrix* Vol. 20, No. 2 (2010).
- Nov 20 Textbook Chapter 14, “Public Policy and Economics”
- Nov 23 **Third Essay Assignment Due by Beginning of Class**
Topic: Either something about the separation of powers or something about the relative importance (or different importance) of political structure and political ideas.
Discussion of essay topic.
- Nov 25 Optional class, to review material.
- Nov 27 Thanksgiving Break

Part V: How Bad Does It Look?

- Nov 30 Students should have read most, or preferably all, of the Mann and Ornstein book by now.
- Dec 2 Students should have finished the Mann and Ornstein book.
Morris Fiorina: "America's Polarized Politics: Causes and Solutions"
Perspectives on Politics Vol. 11, No. 3 (September 2013), pp. 852-859.
Lexington (*The Economist*), "Congress: Even Worse" April 26, 2012.
- Dec 4 *Closing Discussion: Who Governs? How Well?*
Final Essay Topic Distributed

Dec 8

Final Take-Home Essay Exam due to Professor White by Noon. Hardcopy can be delivered to him in his office, Mather House 113; handed to the departmental administrative staff in Mather House 111; or left in his box in Mather House 110. Electronic copies can be e-mailed to joseph.white@case.edu