

The Democracy Project
Syllabus for American Political Institutions*
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Course Number: POLS 155
Course Title: AMERICAN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

CSUN 2004-2006 Catalog Description (page 469)

Examination of the development and dynamics of American political institutions and political processes including a special emphasis upon the role of minority groups. Satisfies the Title V United States Constitution requirement and the California State and Local Government requirement.

I. Course Description

This course is designed to introduce students to the structures and processes that define American government and politics. Similar attention is given to parallel institutions and procedures that distinguish the state of California. The subject matter will acquaint students with important actors and events that have shaped these systems and will exhort students to think about politics in an analytical and critical manner. Throughout the course, students are also instructed to examine and debate selected questions of national, state and local public policy. Lastly, because this subject is intended to increase one's understanding of the relationship between the American people and their government, the course will enhance one's capacity to fulfill his or her responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic nation. To that end, this course includes a service-learning experience designed to encourage participation in civic affairs.

II. Student Learning Goals and Objectives

1. Introduce students to the processes of American and California government, enabling them to:

* Note: This outline integrates a service-learning experience into POLS 155, a California Title V course satisfying the Constitution and U.S., State and Local Government requirement.

- explore the terms and context on which the government was established, and the evolution it has experienced since its inception.
 - describe how the nation's political and governmental institutions have evolved and discuss whether they remain suited to the challenges that confront the nation today.
 - demonstrate the connection between the guiding principles of the American Constitution and the role of politics and government in contemporary American life.
2. Acquaint students to the institutions of American and California government, fostering the ability to:
- explore the socioeconomic structure of the United States and its relationship to the principles and ideals that underlie the American political culture.
 - describe governmental structures created by the Constitution (i.e. the scope, organization and powers of Congress, the presidency and the federal judiciary) as well as the role of informal substructures (voters, parties, interest groups, and the media) which make up the American political system.
 - demonstrate familiarity with the relationships between American governmental and political institutions, for example, the politics of judicial appointments or the workings of federalism.
3. Stimulate students to think about American and California politics in an analytical manner, enhancing their critical thinking and writing skills, encouraging them to:
- compare the basic theory of American democracy with the way political institutions and processes actually work and evaluate the effectiveness of the American political system.
 - explain the motivations and behavior of institutional actors and the variety of informal groups and individuals who seek to influence governmental policy.
 - demonstrate an understanding of political power or how the political process determines who gets what, when, and why.
 - raise questions about the central values that shape the lives of Americans as a national community.
 - evaluate the role of minority groups in a democratic nation
4. Help students analyze and evaluate selected public policy questions about which there is considerable disagreement among the American public. As result, students should be able to:
- identify persistent issues and problems facing the American society and its government.
 - evaluate assumptions and evidence surrounding significant questions of public policy and come to reasoned conclusion about their efficiency and equity.

5. Encourage civic engagement and political participation leading to an increased capacity to fulfill one's responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic nation.
Students taking this course should:
 - demonstrate and understanding of the relationship between ordinary Americans and their government and how this relationship shapes political outcomes and the legitimacy of governmental action.
 - actively participate in discussions and debates, addressing the role of the individuals in producing solutions to society's problems.
 - develop an increased sense of collective responsibility and commitment to engaging in meaningful civic action.

III. Outline of Course Content

The subject matter of this course will include study of the U. S. Constitution, the organization and processes of the primary formal institutions of government it creates, and the relationships between these institutions. The formal institutions include the Congress, the presidency, the federal judiciary, and federalism. We will also examine the primary informal institutions (the media, political parties, executive branch/bureaucracy, interest groups, voting, campaigns and elections) that link citizens with the above mentioned formal governmental institutions. Parallel instruction and discussion of the institutions and procedures of the State of California will also be covered. Attention will also be given to the founding and development of the American political system, civil rights and liberties, and the formation of American public opinion, political culture/ideology.

This course is also reflective of an concern expressed by a special taskforce of the American Political Science Association, who warn that , "...current levels of political knowledge, political engagement, and political enthusiasm are so low as to threaten the validity and stability of democratic politics in the United States." Thus, this course also seeks to foster civic engagement by incorporating a service-learning component designed to develop a commitment to engaging in meaningful civic action

IV. Course Requirements

The responsibilities of each class participant are as follows:

1. *Carefully read the assignment for each class session.* I expect students to attend class regularly and be prepared to ask and answer questions about the assigned material and to contribute to class discussions. The lectures *often* include material not covered in the readings. The following books are required texts.
 - Kernell, Samuel and Gary Jacobson. 2003. *The Logic of American Politics, Second Edition*. Congressional Quarterly Press.

- Cahn, Matthew Allen, H. Eric Schockman, and David M. Shafie. 2001. *Rethinking California: Politics and Policy in the Golden State*. Prentice Hall.
2. *Monitor some news source* during the semester. The reading load in this class is quite light, so there is no excuse for being uninformed. Your choice of news source does not have to be free of ideological bias to be a reliable source of information, so long as you understand its political orientation. While print sources are generally better than electronic ones, the easiest way to keep informed on a daily basis is to listen to “Morning Edition” or “All Things Considered” on National Public Radio (KCRW 89.9 FM) at 6:00-9:00 a.m. and 4:00-6:00 p.m. respectively. The next best electronic source of news is the “MacNeil News Hour” on PBS. The nightly news programs from NBC, CBS, ABC, and FOX emphasize visual over substantive news but are still good sources of political information. In the print media, the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* are the best sources for daily news. Excellent weekly sources of print news include the *National Journal* and *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*.
 3. *Spend a minimum of the (10) hours during the semester assisting a political, non-profit, or governmental agency or group assisting them with some political, public service, or policy issue.* For example, students may volunteer to work in the office of a member of City Council or the district office of a member Congress and help resolve constituent problems. Students may work for associations temporarily organized by local candidates or political parties win election to public office. Students may also assist non-profit corporations that provide community or social services or implements public policy. The Center for Community Service-Learning in SH 435 will help place students with an appropriate agency.

After the project is approved, students shall download the Student Attendance Record, Contact Information, and Service-Learning Informed Consent forms from the Center for Service-Learning’s website at www.csun.edu/~ocls99/students.htm. Then contact the organization and schedule a time to perform your service.

4. *After completing the project, students will write a five page paper reflecting on their service-learning experience.* The paper should describe the mission of the agency or group assisted, the population they serve, the view and approach they take in solving their client’s problems, and the resources (staff, money, etc.) they have to address the problem. Papers must show reflection about one’s role and responsibility in producing solutions to society’s problems and should connect the lessons learned in class with the service performed.

V. Methods of Evaluation

There will be *six exams during the semester and a final exam*, each will include multiple choice, and short answer questions. The questions will be drawn from the reading materials and lectures on the preceding sections of the course.

The service-learning reflective papers should be word processed (double-spaced, standard font) and proof-read for spelling and grammatical errors. The writing will be evaluated according its clarity and conciseness.

Students will be assigned a letter grade (A, A-, B+, B, B-, etc.), weighted according to the following formula:

Participation and attendance	5 percent
Five of six exams (10% ea., lowest score ignored)	75 percent
Service learning reflective paper	10 percent
Final exam	10 percent

III. Political Science Department Student Code of Conduct:

I expect you to show your fellow students and me common courtesy and act in a way that is consistent with an educational environment. No make-up exams will be given without documented major medical or emergency family excuses. Students may not intentionally engage in any sort of behavior that is disruptive to the classroom. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- entering the class late or leaving early;
- engaging in non-class related conversation with classmates;
- receiving or answering cellular phone calls or pages in non-emergencies;
- sleeping.

The CSUN catalog defines plagiarism as “intentionally or knowingly representing the words, ideas, or work of another as one’s own in academic exercise.” I do not tolerate plagiarism or academic dishonesty of any kind and I will, at a minimum, give an F for the course to any student guilty of plagiarism. The CSUN catalog also authorizes me to refer the case to the appropriate University officials and seek expulsion of the student from the University. I will exercise that option if I feel it is warranted. Make sure all your work is properly cited and do not represent the work of another as your own.

VI. Topics By Week

Week	Topic
Week 1	Syllabus Review and Introduction. The Logic of American Politics Video and discussion: “The Murder of Emmitt Till” Reading: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 1.

Week 2	The Constitution. Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 2., Cahn et. al. Chapter 6, pages 59-67.
Week 3	Federalism. Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 3, Cahn et. al. Chapter 9. Exam #1
Week 4	Civil Rights Reading: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 4. Civil Liberties. Reading: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 5,
Week 5	Exam #2 Congress 1 Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 6, Cahn et. al. Chapter 7
Week 6	Congress 2 The Presidency 1 Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 7, Cahn et. al. Chapter 3.
Week 7	The Presidency 2 Exam #3
Week 8	The Bureaucracy Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 8, Cahn et. al. pages 67-69. The Federal Judiciary 1 Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 9, Cahn et. al. Chapter 8
Week 9	The Federal Judiciary 2 Exam #4
Week 10	Public Opinion Reading: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 10. Voting, Campaigns, and Elections 1 Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 11, Cahn et. al. Chapter 12.
Week 11	Voting, Campaigns, and Elections 2 Exam #5
Week 12	Political Parties Reading: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 12, Cahn et. al. Chapter 12, pages. 114-115.
Week 13	Interest Groups Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 13. Cahn et. al. Chapter 12, pages. 115-119.
Week 14	Exam #6 Thanksgiving Vacation
Week 15	The News Media Service learning reflective paper due Last Class: Dilemmas of Institutional Reform Final Exam Preparation Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapter 14, 15, Cahn et. al., pages. 109-114.
Week 16	Final Exam