

**The American Political System**  
**California State University, Northridge**  
**Political Science 155 -- Fall 2008**

Professor:	Matthew Cahn	T/Th: 11:00 am – 12:15 pm	USU 2207B
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### **Course Description**

Politics has been described as who gets what, when, and why. This course focuses on the American process of determining who gets what, when, and why. Are we democratic? What is democracy? How can 300 million people make decisions together? The course will look at the formal institutional process -- Congress, the Presidency, the Supreme Court-- as well as the subtle forms of influence that characterize the national bureaucracy-- campaigning, PACS, political consultants, mass media. Throughout, we will attempt to identify the underlying value choices we make, as a society, and as individual citizens.

Why study American politics? Quite simply, it affects and shapes your options in life. Power and control are central concerns. The better we as citizens understand politics, the more control we retain over our lives and our society. Empowerment can only come from knowledge.

### **Course Learning Objectives**

This course satisfies the Title V United States Constitution requirement and the California State and Local Government requirement. The course is designed to:

- 1) Introduce students to the processes of American and California government, enabling them to:
  - a. Understand the terms and context on which the government was established, and the evolution it has experienced since its inception.
  - b. Describe how the nation's political and governmental institutions have evolved and whether they remain suited to the challenges that confront the nation today.
  - c. 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 with the formal and informal institutions of American and California government, fostering the ability to:
  - a. Understand the socioeconomic structure of the United States and its relationship to the principles and ideals that underlie the American political culture.
  - b. 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.
  - c. 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 skills, encouraging them to:
  - a. 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.
  - b. Explain the motivations and behavior of institutional actors and the variety of informal groups and individuals who seek to influence governmental policy.
  - c. Demonstrate an understanding of political power or how the political process determines who gets what, when, and why.
  - d. Evaluate the role of minority groups in a democratic nation.
  
- 4) 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:

- a. Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between ordinary Americans and their government and how this relationship shapes political outcomes and the legitimacy of governmental action.
- b. Actively participate in discussions and debates, addressing the role of the individuals in producing solutions to society's problems.

### Required Texts (see book purchasing options at end of syllabus)

Lowi, Ginsberg, and Shepsle: *American Government* (10<sup>th</sup> ed, Norton, Brief, 2008)  
 Anagnoson, et al.: *Governing California in the Twenty-First Century* (NY: Norton 2008)  
 eInstruction Clickers  
 (Package ISBN: 978-0-393-18839-4)

### Course Requirements

Participation	10%	Students are expected to attend class sessions regularly and to keep up with assigned readings. Expect to read approximately 40 pages per week (about two chapters). Further, students are expected to participate actively in class discussions and projects. If students complete all 4 exams they may drop the lowest score. The Final Exam is cumulative and required of all students.
Exam I	20%	
Exam II	20%	
Exam III	20%	
Exam IV	20%	
Final Exam	30%	

There are 4 regular exams and a final exam. The exams will be administered online through WebCT. You will have a specific period of time to take the exam – and you may take the exam from any computer (at home, on campus, in the Bahamas).

I will drop the lowest score of your 4 regular exams at the end of the semester. Because I do this, I do not give makeup exams. You must have a valid and documented reason for missing an exam or you will not have the option of a makeup exam.

### **Student Conduct:**

Academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated. Any student guilty of any act of academic dishonesty will receive an “F” for the course and I will report all incidents of academic dishonesty to the Dean of Students.

In addition, students may not engage in any sort of behavior that is disruptive in the classroom. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- entering the class late or leaving early;
- engaging in conversations unrelated to class during classtime;
- receiving or answering cellular phone calls or text messages – **turn your cell phone off!**
- Using a laptop computer, iPod, or other device in class – **no Laptops may be used in class.**
- sleeping in class;

### **Course Outline: Please note that Readings MUST be done prior to day assigned!!**

#### **Part I: The Foundations of American Governance**

##### Week I (8/26-28): Constitutional Principles

Principles of Government  
 Constitutional Democracy  
 The United States Constitution  
 Lowi 1-2 & Appendices A3-A18  
 Declaration of Independence, US Constitution

##### Week II (9/2-4): Federalism and the Separation of Powers

The Evolution of the U.S. Constitution  
 Checks and Balances & Federalism  
 Lowi 3

Week III (9/9-11): Civil Rights & Liberties

Civil Rights vs. Civil Liberties

Lowi 4; Constitution including All Amendments

**Exam 1: 9/16 (Online using WebCT – available 5:00 am to 11:00 pm)**

**Part II: Institutions of Government**

Week IV (9/18): Congress

Lowi 5

Week V (9/23-25): The President

Lowi 6

Week VI (9/30-10/2): The Executive Bureaucracy

Lowi 7

Week VII (10/7): The Courts

Lowi 8

**Exam 2: 10/9 (Online using WebCT – available 5:00 am to 11:00 pm)**

**Part III: The Political Process**

Week VIII (10/14-16): Public Opinion

Lowi 9

Week IX (10/21-23): Elections and Parties

Lowi 10-11

Week X (10/28-30): Interest Groups

Lowi 12

Week XI (11/4): The Media

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/zaller/media%20politics%20book%20.pdf> (pp 1-29)

**Exam 3: 11/6 (Online using WebCT – available 5:00 am to 11:00 pm)**

**No Class 11/11 – Veterans Day**

**Part IV: Public Policy**

Week XII (11/13-18): Public Policy

Lowi 13-14

**Part V: California Government**

Week XIII (11/20-25): State and Local Politics: California

Anagnoson 1-5

**No Class 11/27 – Thanksgiving**

Week XIV (12/2): State and Local Politics: California

Anagnoson 6-10

**Exam 4: 12/4 (Online using WebCT – available 5:00 am to 11:00 pm)**

Week XV (12/9): Bringing it all Together

Epilogue: The Democratic Faith

Review for Final Exam

**FINAL EXAM – Tuesday 12/16 – Online using WebCT – available 5:00 am to 11:00 pm**