

Goals and Structure

Political Science 184

Honors Class in “Introduction to American Government”

Fall, 2009

Professor Byron E. Shafer

This Honors Class in “*Introduction to American Government*” will concentrate on three goals, and it is the combination of these three, rather than the load in any one, that should distinguish the class:

- **The first is, of course, to acquire the basics for understanding and interpreting American politics. Here, there is a set of topics—the separation of powers, nomination by primary election, and so forth—that any knowledgeable person would have to master. We shall master them too. Accordingly, the most formal part of our sessions will be directed to this goal, through lectures on key topics. So, in part, will the readings, though you will probably have other uses for them as well. A major examination will test achievement of this goal. This is the institutional backdrop to American politics. An understanding of it ought to stay with you for a long time.**
- **The second goal is to attain some familiarity with the evolution of American politics during ‘our time’—which will mean, for this class, the end of the Second World War until December of 2009. This goal is based on the belief that interpretation of modern American politics is almost impossible without understanding where it came from, that is, the sequence and context of its**

development. There will be readings focused on this as well, and later lectures will address it explicitly. There will be a minor examination testing this goal directly. There will also be a serious term paper that will help to integrate both halves of the class.

- And the third goal is to apply the understandings gained from class lectures and research projects to the events of politics as they unfold during our time together. In other words, if we get the first part of the class right—if the things we are addressing through lectures and readings really are essential to understanding American politics—then it ought to be possible to observe them ‘in action’ as we go about our business. At the same time, serious students of current affairs ought to move from being a glorified cheering section (hurrah for my heroes, boo for yours) to being informed observers, who begin to understand why political actors do what they do. Daily reading of a national newspaper will be the major tool here, followed by discussion during most class periods.

In this regard, the fall semester of 2009 has its own distinctive place in American politics. We are going to be in class together during the period when the policy program of the Obama Administration meets its most crucial tests. Crisis legislation has been passed; the other priorities of this presidency must now be established. So, we get to observe the interplay between president and Congress, and we may even get to observe the workings of a newly altered Supreme Court. Plus all the spontaneous developments, domestic and international, that can never be foreseen but that always color American politics in major ways.

In any case, a weekly class ought to have three parts. Number one is a formal lecture on the main focus of the day. This is the largest part, though as you will see, even it varies substantially in the course of the semester. Number two is some planning for, and then collective help with, the term paper, plus any other administrative business that we need to do. For several classes, specialists will visit us (or we will visit them) to offer advice on developing a serious research project. And number three is discussion of current events since we last met, not for their own sake, much less for how we feel about them, but for how they fit with—or stress—the other things that we are learning along the way. The program sheet in this packet sets all three of these out together.

In return, your responsibilities are: first, to do the assigned readings and attend class; second, to get an early start on that term paper; and third, to read a national newspaper regularly, by which I mean *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, or *The Financial Times*. Note that most of these can be read on the web rather than from the newsstand if you prefer. While I believe that it is more productive to read your chosen paper in hard copy, I do not insist on it. Likewise, while I believe that missing lectures in the first part of the class is self-destructive, I do not insist on attendance. For the last part, I do.

The final item in this packet is a separate handout on possibilities for the term paper, and the paper itself is discussed there. But note again the organization of the class, which I have tried to adjust so as to make your responsibilities as easy to meet as possible:

- The first eight weeks cover the absolute fundamentals of American government. We shall try to acquire these basics while simultaneously setting up the term papers. Readings are important, but the substance of these lectures is even more critical to the main examination. The ninth week is then an examination covering all these basics; this exam, not the one in the exam period, is the major one for the class.

- In the six weeks that follow, I shall try to put all these elements back together in a more comprehensive fashion, through lectures aimed at the bigger picture. These lectures are video-based, supported by campaign advertisements from the television era. They are meant to place modern politics in the context of postwar political history, while taking some of the load off your shoulders during the period when you should be working intensively on the paper.

A shorter examination during our scheduled exam time will cover the shorter half of the class, the one involving a postwar overview. And in the end, grades will be based 40% on the main examination, 40% on the term paper, and 20% on this shorter exam at the end. There will be an additional 5%, a potential 'bonus' or 'cushion', that is meant to recognize positive classroom contributions, as with helpful discussion of relevant current events in particular. Term papers are due on or before the final exam date for the class.

Class Program

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- Week 1. **Lecture:** *“What Kind of Government?”*
Work Session: Introduction of Class Members and Class Program
Current Events: Federalism and the Separation of Powers
- Week 2. **Lecture:** *“What Kind of Society?”*
Work Session: Introduction of Paper Topics
Current Events: The United States in the Wider World
- Week 3. **Lecture:** *“What Kind of Politics?”*
Work Session: Confirmation of Paper Topics
Current Events: Populism and Structural Democratization
- Week 4. **Lecture:** *“The Presidency”*
Work Session: Researching Scholarly Papers, Memorial Library
Current Events: Presidential Politics
- Week 5. **Lecture:** *“Congress”*
Work Session: Paper Synopsis
Current Events: Congressional Politics
- Week 6. **Lecture:** *“The Courts”*
Work Session: Trouble Shooting
Current Events: Judicial Politics
- Week 7. **Lecture:** *“Political Parties”*
Work Session: Writing Scholarly Papers, The Writing Center
Current Events: Partisan Politics
- Week 8. **Lecture:** *“The Bureaucracy, Interest Groups, & Mass Media”*
Work Session: Exam Preparations
Current Events: Intermediaries in American Politics
- Week 9. **Major Examination**
- Week 10. **Lecture:** *“The Late New Deal Era”*
Work Session: Examination Review
- Week 11. **Lecture:** *“The Era of Divided Government”*
Work Session: Return to Term Papers
Current Events: ‘The Old Politics’

- Week 12. Lecture: “*The Clinton Years*”**
Work Session: Advanced Trouble Shooting
Current Events: ‘The New Politics’
- Week 13. Thanksgiving Holiday**
- Week 14. Lecture: “*The Bush Years*”**
Work Session: Advanced Trouble Shooting
Current Events: A Clinton-Bush ‘Era’?
- Week 15. Lecture: “*2008—and After?*”**
Work Session: Advanced Trouble Shooting
Current Events: The Changing Nature of American Politic

Reading List

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Part I

Background to American Politics

Week 1. September 4. What Kind of Government?

“The Constitution: The Revolutionary Mind”, Chapter 2 &
“Federalism: Which Government Rules?”, Chapter 3 in
Paul C. Light, *A Delicate Balance: An Introduction to American
Government*

Week 2. September 11. What Kind of Society?

Seymour Martin Lipset, “American Exceptionalism Reaffirmed”, Chapter 1
in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *Is America Different? A New Look at
American Exceptionalism*
“What is the American Way? Four Themes in Search of Their Next
Incarnation,” Chapter 10 in
Byron E. Shafer, *The Two Majorities and the Puzzle of Modern
American Politics*

Week 3. September 18. What Kind of Politics?

“Public Opinion: The Consent of the Governed”, chapter 4 in
Light, *A Delicate Balance*
“Politics and Public Policy”, Chapter 12 in
James Q. Wilson, *American Government: Brief Version*

Part II

Fundamentals of American Government

Week 4. September 25. The Presidency

“The Presidency: Mission Impossible”, Chapter 11 in
Light, *A Delicate Balance*
“The Presidency”, Chapter 8 in
Wilson, *American Government*

Week 5. October 2. Congress

“Congress: To Make the Laws”, Chapter 10 in
Light, *A Delicate Balance*
“Congress”, Chapter 7 in
Wilson, *American Government*

Week 6. October 9. The Courts

“The Federal Judiciary”, Chapter 10 in
Light, A Delicate Balance

“The Judiciary”, Chapter 10 in
Wilson, American Government

Week 7. October 16. Political Parties

“Political Parties: The Lost Connection?”, Chapter 6 in *Light, A Delicate Balance*

“Political Parties and Interest Groups”, Chapter 5 in
Wilson, American Government

Week 8. October 23. The Bureaucracy, Interest Groups, & Mass Media

“The Bureaucracy”, Chapter 9 in
Wilson, American Government

“Interest Groups: A Nation Divided”, Chapter 7 &
“The Media: America’s Interpreters”, Chapter 5 in
Light, A Delicate Balance

Week 9. October 30. Examination

Part III

The Pattern of Modern American Politics

Week 10. November 6. The Late New Deal Era

“Economic Development, Issue Evolution, and Divided Government, 1955-2000”, Chapter 1 in Shafer, *The Two Majorities*

Week 11. November 13. The Era of Divided Government

“We Are All Southern Democrats Now”, Chapter 4 in
Shafer, *The Two Majorities*

Week 12. November 20. The Clinton Years

“Are There Any New Democrats? And by the Way, Was There a Republican Revolution?”, Chapter 3 in Shafer, *The Two Majorities*

Week 13. November 27. Thanksgiving Holiday

No assigned reading

Week 14. December 4. The Bush Years

“The Search for a New Center”, Chapter 2 in
Shafer, *The Two Majorities*

Week 15. December 11. Obama Years

No assigned reading

Term Paper Outline

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Much of Political Science 184 is devoted to larger aspects and continuing trends in American politics, those things that, if they are not constant, are obviously important at a given point in time and reasonably stable across time as well. Yet American politics has also changed substantially during the years since the Second World War, and this paper is intended to focus on some major aspect of that change, of how we got from 'then' to 'now'.

The major institutions of American national government—the Presidency, Congress, and the Court—work differently now than they did then. The major intermediaries of American politics—political parties, interest groups, and mass media of information—work differently now than they did then. The very nature of American society—its population, its key social groups, the concerns of their members—are different.

So is the substance of public policy, the things about which people fight within that politics. Economic policy, about the distribution of material goods, is different. Cultural policy, about proper standards of behavior, is different as well. Foreign affairs, civil rights, trade, the environment, taxation, criminal justice, social welfare, civil liberties, macroeconomics, education, family structure: all have come onto (and gone off) the policy dial.

A term paper addressing one of these changes needs to do four things. **First**, it needs to describe the situation in the years following the Second World War, roughly 1946-1966. **Second**, it needs to describe the situation in recent years,

roughly 1989-2009. Third, it needs to note what has changed, and to try to say something about why. And fourth, it needs to conclude by saying why the change matters.

These are not intended to be long papers: think in terms of 25 pages, with a 20-page minimum and a 30-page maximum. But remember: at that length, the need to have three clear sections (then, now, and change), a paragraph or two of introduction, plus a short conclusion will force some careful thinking about what is important and what is not.

Note that this also implies a trade-off in *picking topics*. Small and focused topics are easier to write and easier to work into the required format. But they also require more digging in their research. Larger and less focused topics make it easier to amass information. But they are much harder to ingest, to organize, and to present concretely and in detail. On balance, smaller and more focused topics are likely to serve you better, but I shall suggest a variety of possibilities of both sorts.

Lastly, you are welcome to develop an existing interest by way of this paper. But note that the detachment necessary to write such a paper may be easier to sustain in a topic or area which you do not (at least, not at the moment) regard as emotionally important, as opposed to a topic or area which you do. I shall say some things in our first class session about how a self-conscious political scientist ought to think about such matters.

With that as background, here are some topics that I recommend for a term paper in this class. Any one of these will be acceptable, and most offer many different ways to address them. They may suggest other topics to you that are not

**on the list, and these can easily be acceptable too, as long as we discuss them first:
all we need is to be agreed that they have the same general scope as those already on
the list.**

The Presidency

Presidential Nominations and/or Elections

Organization of the White House Office

Presidential Policy Selection

Presidents in Economic Policy

Presidents in Foreign Policy

Presidents in Social Policy

Congress

Congressional Elections

Committee Organization

Floor Organization and Leadership

Congress in Economic Policy

Congress in Foreign Policy

Congress in Social Policy

The Supreme Court

Judicial Selection

Court Operations

Decision-Making

Courts in Economic Policy

Courts in Foreign Policy

Courts in Social Policy

Society

Population Growth and Decline

Social Group Advance and Retreat

'Exceptionalism'

Political Participation

Economic Policy Divisions among the Public

Foreign Policy Divisions among the Public

Social Policy Divisions among the Public

Political Parties

Mass Public Identifications with Parties

Group Attachments to Parties

Nature of Party Organizations

Fund Raising

Evolution of Party Factions

The Major Parties and Economic Policy

The Major Parties and Foreign Policy

The Major Parties and Social Policy

Interest Groups

Main Organized Interests, Growth and Decline

Lobbying National Government

Organized Interests in Electoral Politics

Evolution of Major Interest Group(s)

Organized Interests and Economic Policy

Organized Interests and Foreign Policy

Organized Interests and Social Policy

Mass Media of Information

Changing Mix of Media

Television News and National Politics

Radio News and National Politics

Newspaper News and National Politics

Press Coverage of National Government

Government Use of Mass Media

Governance

Size and Role of National Government

Federalism

Separation of Powers

Divided Government (Split Partisan Control)