AMERICAN GOVERNMENT SPRING 2010

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Course Description and Goals:

American government is a survey course intended to increase the student’s understanding of the institutions and processes of American democracy. The theme of the class is “How well does our democracy work?” and course materials, which include lectures, readings, audio-visual presentations and in-class discussions, are approached from this perspective.

Completion of the course should assist the students in their ability to:

1. Analyze both the theoretical and practical workings of the American political system.

2. Examine and analyze the major American political institutions: the Presidency, Congress, the Judiciary, political parties, interest groups.

3. Compare and contrast the various political models: Elitism, pluralism, etc.

4. Evaluate the role of the mass media in elections and governing.

5. Examine and assess the concepts of political culture and socialization.

6. Compare/contrast the roles of the federal, state and local governments with emphasis on California.

7. Appraise the American political economy.

8. Analyze the importance of civil liberties and civil rights in American society.

9. Explain the role of citizenship.

10. Evaluate the public policy-making process on both domestic and foreign affairs.

Student Learning Outcomes (SLO’s)
- After completing this course the student should be able to describe the concepts, theories, and functions of the American Political System. The student should be able to identify and describe at least four of the basic principles of the U.S. Constitution and the government of California.

- In a multiple choice exam, students will demonstrate knowledge of the basic principles of the United States Constitution including it Articles and Amendments, as well as those for the government of California.
Lecture Topics, Reading Assignments and Test Dates:

Section 1: The Constitution and the Presidency

Irony of Democracy: Chapters 1, 2, and 10

Test 1: Tuesday 3/9

Section 2: Voting, Media, Political Advertising

Irony of Democracy: Chapters 5, 6, and 8

Test 2: Tuesday 3/27

Section 3: Civil Liberties, Civil Rights and the Courts

Irony of Democracy: Chapters 13, 15 and 16

Test 3: Thursday 5/6

Section 4: Congress, Parties, Interest Groups

Irony of Democracy: Chapters 7, 9 and 12

Test 4: Thursday 6/3

Grading: The course grade is based on 200 possible points from all the tests plus the writing portfolio. To earn an “A” grade one must have 180 points; a “B” requires 160 points; a “C” requires 120 points.

1) The four tests are 140 points total (35 points each).

2) Writing Portfolio: 60 points possible. Due Tuesday 6/8. Includes all Assignment 1 papers and (if completed) Assignment 2 extra credit report. The writing portfolio is graded in its entirety, based on the content and quality of the writing. An excellent portfolio earns 55-60 points, a good portfolio earns between 50-54 points, and so forth. An excellent portfolio would include all assignments fully completed as assigned and writing of consistently good quality.
Assignments:

Assignments 1 and 2 are required for all students. Assignment 1 involves five short papers and class discussions on those papers. Assignment 2 is a 2-page research report and a brief in-class presentation. There is also an option for extra credit, which (if done satisfactorily) will raise your lowest test score by one grade (e.g., a “C” to a “B”).

Assignment 1 Short papers and discussions

Periodically (see dates and topics on page three) we will hold in-class discussions on important political issues. To receive credit for this assignment, you must submit five short papers (minimum one page) and attend the class discussions on those five topics. Students must select either Set One or Set Two articles and do all the articles in that set. If you miss a discussion, you can do one paper from the other Set. These short papers serve as the basis for your participation in the in-class discussions. You should:

a) Read the article carefully with the intent of understanding the author’s main theme or argument (These are professional articles and they have an organizing idea---please do not offer a critique suggesting “it makes no sense” or something to that effect);

b) Summarize this theme in the first paragraph of your paper;

c) In the remainder of your paper focus on an aspect of the topic/article that you find interesting and discuss it (you can offer your opinion and/or bring in other information that you find pertinent).

d) The written summaries must be turned in the beginning of the class session on the day of the discussion. These papers will be signed and dated by me, and then returned to you for submission in your written work folder at the last week of class. Be sure to pick up your paper after class. I am not responsible for papers not picked up.
All articles are posted on the website:

www.saddleback.edu/faculty/agordon

Set One:
1. Americans are Right to Resist an Atheist President 2/25
2. Leaders Should Not Follow Opinion Polls or Experiment in Polling 3/4
3. TV AD Wars 3/25
4. Incendiary Speech--In Defense of Prejudice 4/22
5. Gay Marriage and Option Four or Gay Marriage and Conservatives 4/29

Set Two:
1. Leaders Should Not Follow Opinion Polls or Experiment in Polling 3/2
2. Vanishing Voter or The Reasoning Voter 3/16
3. VMI: Woman in the Barracks 4/6
4. Death Penalty 4/27
5. Women as Candidates 5/13

Extra Credit Articles (either one)
1. Bias of Language and Pictures 3/18
2. One Nation, Slightly Divisible 5/20

Assignment 2 Research Paper

This assignment is a research report (approximately 2 pages in length) that requires you to do a simple case study. First, you need to select a specific federal or state law, city ordinance, etc. (I will give you examples in the first day of class). The paper should have three parts. First, you should summarize the legislative act or proposal, including an clear explanation of its central purpose, i.e., what the law intends to prohibit, regulate or encourage. Next, analyze the political dynamics behind the law by explaining who (an individual, corporation, interest group, etc.) worked to get this law passed, modified, or even stopped completely. Include a discussion of why they were specifically interested in this law’s passage or its modification. (Note: In some cases it might be more revealing to focus on its implementation). Finally, evaluate the law under discussion by indicating whether you believe your case is evidence of the political process working properly, or, on the other hand, it is an example of government not serving the public interest. To make the assignment more enjoyable, I suggest you pick something that is personally relevant, connected to your career interests, or at least somewhat intriguing. Be sure to cite your sources in the written paper. proposals. Assignment includes a brief in-class discussion of your paper held on 5/25 and 5/27. Below are some sample websites:
http://thomas.loc.gov/ (General source for federal legislation--very comprehensive)

www.statenet.com (tracks legislative issues)

http://www.rtknet.org/ or www.commoncause.org or www.citizen.org (Public interest groups)

www.sierraclub.org or www.nrdc.org (Environmental groups)

www.protect.org (Child protection) www.nra.org (Gun issues)

www.peta.org or www.aspca.org (Animal protection)

http://www.fda.gov/ (Food and Drug Administration)

http://feinstein.senate.gov/legislation.html (California Senator--all politicians have such sites)

http://www.now.org/ (National Organization for Women) www.cato.org (Libertarian think tank)