COURSE SYLLABUS

AMERICAN NATIONAL GOVERNMENT:
The Political System Today

POLS 110BA/BB Fall semester, 2015

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Office hours: Fridays 2-4:00 p.m. Since on-campus or off-campus obligations may occasionally prevent my being in my office during office hours, making an appointment in advance, even during office hours, is a good idea. But I do expect to be in my office during office hours on a regular basis. I am also in my office at other times and, of course, available for appointments at other times.

I. INTRODUCTION

This course will provide an overview of the USA political system. We shall treat a considerable amount of material in one semester and shall try to do so without succumbing to the temptation to cover too much too quickly or in insufficient depth.

An introductory course on the USA political system can be taught from a number of different perspectives. In this course we shall be particularly attentive to how the contemporary American political system compares and contrasts with other members of the set of contemporary political systems known as “representative democracies” or “polyarchies” (e.g., the United Kingdom, Canada, Costa Rica, France, Israel, Sweden, Australia, India, Japan). In focusing on distinctive features of how the American political system operates today, we shall be addressing selected aspects of what is sometimes called “American exceptionalism.”

In the context of these comparative (that is, “cross-national”) and contemporary foci, relations between the legislative and executive branches in U.S. national government and their consequences for the policy-making process will be one of two major emphases in the course. The underlying structural arrangement is often called the “separation of powers” and is a fundamental and distinctive feature of American national government. The second major emphasis course will be the unusual nature of the party system and of related nomination and election processes, as well as their impact on the practice of representative democracy in the United States. Even though most Americans take the U.S. party and electoral systems for granted, these systems are unique and significant elements in the functioning of the contemporary American political system. In the context of
these two course emphases, we shall pay some attention to the on-going 2015-2016 nomination/election cycle that will culminate in congressional and presidential elections on 8 November 2016.

As this course begins, Barack Obama is past the mid-way point in the seventh year of his presidency and the 114th Congress is more than halfway through the first year of its two-year duration. The competition to replace President Obama when his term in office ends on 20 January 2017 is well underway.

Obama is a Democrat, but Republicans currently have majority control of both the Senate (54 Republicans, 44 Democrats, two independents) and the House of Representatives (246 Republicans, 188 Democrats, one vacancy). Political scientists call this state of affairs “divided government,” and it has prevailed since January 2011 (as well as for the majority of the years since World War II). In 2009 and 2010, Democrats held the majority of seats in the House and Senate, and the presidency was occupied by Democrat Barack Obama. Political scientists contrast that state of affairs with “divided government” and call it “unified government.”

As already suggested, both (i) the “separation of powers” structure in American national government and (ii) the American party system and related nomination and electoral processes are distinctive features of the American political system. Together they affect how the government functions and what it does and does not do. Throughout the semester we shall be considering the interplay between the so-called separation of powers and the American party and electoral systems, the two major emphases in the course, and the presidential and congressional elections coming in November 2016 can provide a useful background against which to address this interplay. By the end of the semester, students should understand major characteristics of contemporary USA-style representative democracy and how it compares and contrasts with other national democratic systems around the world.

Both lectures and class discussions will assume completion of assigned readings on schedule, and efforts will be made to integrate current happenings into the course as the semester unfolds. Students enrolled in POLS 110BA/BB will be expected to keep up with current events relating to American national government system in a serious and sustained way. This will help in making connections between “larger”—political scientists would say “theoretical” or “conceptual”—points about the American political system that will be addressed in the course and what is currently happening in the political system. As a way of keeping up with current events, students will be responsible for reading relevant articles in *The New York Times* on a daily basis for several weeks during the semester. The weeklies *National Journal* and *CQ Weekly*, as well as *National Review*, a bi-weekly, and *The New Republic*, a monthly—are all available in R.O.W. Library in hard copy and provide timely information and analyses. The weekend political “talk shows” on television—“Washington Week in Review” (PBS), “Face the Nation” (CBS), “Meet the Press” (NBC), “This Week” (ABC), “Fox News
Sunday (FOX), and “State of the Union” (CNN)—can also be informative. In addition, three C-SPAN cable TV channels offer round-the-clock coverage of many relevant and informative political events.

II. TOPICS TO BE TREATED IN THE COURSE

Topic 1 Introductory Matters, including (a) the notion of democracy, (b) the so-called separation of powers, a key structural feature of American national government that stems from the Constitution of 1787, and (c) the notion of political culture and the related notion of political socialization. In addition, we shall in the early weeks of the course begin our “immersion” in current political happenings in American national government.

Topic 2 Congress

Topic 3 The Presidency

Topic 4 Bureaucracy

Topic 5 The Supreme Court and the Rest of the Judiciary

Topic 6 Political Parties

Topic 7 Elections and Campaigns

Topic 8 Interest Groups

Topic 9 (time permitting) Public Opinion and Related Matters; News and Other Media

Topic 10 (time permitting) The Public Policy-Making Process and the Substance of Government Policy in Selected Areas

Topic 11 Assessment of the USA Political System

III. READINGS

Most required readings for the course will come from four sources:

(2) A set of textbook or textbook-like readings on electronic reserve at R.O.W. Library and accessible through the course Moodle site (“Course Library Reserves”).


(4) “Moodle readings” appearing on the Course Moodle site and numbered “1,” “2,” “3”, etc.

Readings for each course Topic will be provided separately in documents titled “Course Readings.” Information about what readings are required and what are recommended, and when particular reading and writing assignments are due, will be announced in class and/or posted on Moodle.

The use of “Textbook or textbook-like readings” posted on Moodle as a substitute for use of a single conventional American government textbook is a recent development in my teaching of POLS 110. An explanation of the reasons for and implications of this approach will be provided in class.

During our *New York Times*-based immersion in current events, daily *New York Times* assignments will be posted on Moodle, and explanations of how NYT assignments will be used in the course will be provided in class. So will information about how students can inexpensively subscribe to the hard-copy daily *New York Times*.

IV. GUEST SPEAKERS, TELEVISED EVENTS, ETC.

During the semester, guest speakers addressing topics relating to the subject matter of POLS 110 will likely appear on the DePauw campus and attendance at these events may be required or recommended for this course. In addition, televised events or local political events may sometimes be called to your attention (e.g., a meeting of the Putnam County Tea Party; televised debates about 2016 presidential aspirants). Short written assignments in connection with guest speakers and/or televised events may be required or identified as possible extra-credit options.

V. STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES; GRADING

Students will be expected to come to class having completed assigned readings and having thought about them. In this context, please read or reread the six points under “Academic Expectations for DePauw Students” in the “Academic Life” part of the *Student Handbook* that is available to students on the DePauw website. Class sessions will consist of lectures and class discussion of assigned
readings and related topics. Students are responsible for being familiar with and abiding by DePauw’s “Academic Integrity Policy,” which appears in the “Academic Life” part of the Student Handbook that appears on the DePauw website.

Unless there is a specific announcement to the contrary (or a student has gotten approval—for good reason—to use such devices), the use of laptops, cell phones, and other similar electronic devices during POLS 110BA/BB classes is prohibited. Cell phones should, of course, be turned off during class.

DePauw University is committed to providing equal access to academic programs and university administered activities with reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Amendments (ADAAA). Any student who feels she or he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability or learning challenge is strongly encouraged to contact Pamela Roberts, Director of Student Disability Services and ADA Compliance for further information on how to receive accommodations and support. Contact information for Student Disability Services is 408 S. Locust Street, Suite 200, in The Memorial Student Union Building (765-658-6267). It is the responsibility of the student to share the letter of accommodation with faculty and staff members. Accommodations will not be implemented until the faculty or staff member has received the official letter. Accommodations are not retroactive. It is the responsibility of the student to discuss implementation of accommodations with each faculty and staff member receiving the letter.

Subject to the possibility of modifications that would, of course, be announced and posted on Moodle, course grades will be calculated on the following bases:

A. Contributions to class discussions, including attendance, evidence of preparation for class, etc. about 15%

B. One (or possibly two) paper(s) (probably a total of about 1500-2000 words) about 15%

C. Two “one-hour” tests (about 15% each) about 30%

D. Miscellaneous bits-and-pieces (e.g., New York Times quizzes; brief submissions on assigned questions that require linking general or conceptual points from the course to specified New York Times articles; ‘hypothesis submissions’; brief written reactions to guest speakers, assigned televised events, or a specific reading assignment; etc.) about 20%

E. Final exam* (for which students may be responsible,
to some extent, for material covered over the entire semester, although there will be significantly greater emphasis on material covered after the second one-hour test)

*POLS 110BA/BB final exams will be given in the time period specified in the University's Final Exam Schedule. Please bear this in mind when making plans to leave campus at the end of the semester. The POLS 110BA (this section meets 9:10-10:10 a.m. Mon, Wed, and Fri) final exam is scheduled for Thursday, 17 December 2015, 8:30-11:30 a.m. The POLS 110BB (this section meets 10:20-11:20 a.m. Mon, Wed, and Fri) final exam is scheduled for Friday, 18 December 2015, 8:30-11:30 a.m.

END