

COURSE SYLLABUS

AMERICAN NATIONAL GOVERNMENT: The Political System Today

POLS 110BA/BB Fall semester, 2016

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Office hours: Fridays 2:15-4:00 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. I am also in my office at times other than my scheduled office hours, and available for appointments at other times. The best way to reach me to schedule an appointment or to raise some other matter of pressing concern is to email me.

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 this context, we shall address the processes that resulted in the selection of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump to be the two major party nominees in 2016.

As this course begins, Barack Obama is past the mid-way point in the eighth and last year of his presidency and the 114th Congress is more than three-quarters of the way through its two-year duration. The process to replace President Obama on 20 January 2017 has occupied a prominent and public role in American politics since early 2015. We shall, of course, not ignore the on-going general election process that will lead to a new president and a new Congress taking office in January 2017.

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 (247 Republicans, 186 Democrats, two vacancies). 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 call that state of affairs “unified government,” in contrast to “divided 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 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 might 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 through R.O.W. Library (in either hard copy or electronic format) and provide timely information and analyses. The weekend political “talk shows” on television—“Washington

Week in Review” (PBS), “Meet the Press” (NBC), “This Week” (ABC), “Fox News Sunday (FOX), “Face the Nation” (CBS), 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 happenings in the American political system.
- 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:

- (1) Bruce Stinebrickner, ed., *American Government*, 46th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2017). [Copies of this book have been ordered through the Eli’s Books. One copy is on reserve at R.O.W. Library.]

- (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”).
- (3) *The New York Times*.
- (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. I’ll explain my reasons for and implications of this approach 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, 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 between 2016 presidential candidates). 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*. A good discussion of "Academic Integrity" appears at <http://www.depauw.edu/academics/academic-resources/academic-integrity/>

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 the office for Student Disability Services in Suite 200 in The Memorial Student Union Building. 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 also 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:

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| 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 17.5 % each) | about 35% |
| D. | Miscellaneous bits-and-pieces (e.g., <i>New York Times</i> quizzes; brief submissions on assigned questions that require linking general or conceptual points from the course to specified <i>New York Times</i> articles; 'hypothesis submissions'; brief written reactions to guest speakers, assigned televised events, or a specific reading assignment; etc.) | about 15% |
| 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)

about 20%

*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 10-11:30 a.m. Tues/Thurs) final exam is scheduled for Thursday, 15 December 2016, 1-4 p.m. The POLS 110BB (this section meets 8:20-9:50 a.m. Tues/Thurs) final exam is scheduled for Wednesday, 14 December 2016, 1-4 p.m.

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