

Midwestern State University
Department of Political Science

POLS 1333: AMERICAN GOVERNMENT I

SPRING 2021

Section 205 TR 08:00-09:20 am (MY 136)

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Course Description

This course will introduce students to the American political system with a brief survey of the political dynamics of the state of Texas. By the conclusion of this course, students will have a basic understanding of some key components of American and Texas politics, such as political culture, the constitution, federalism, election, political parties, interest groups, and the media. To do that, we will look at historical evolution of the American political system and see how Texas state politics have developed in conjunction with the federal government. This course also provides students with opportunities to practice various analytical skills in a range of real-world cases. Classes will include lecture, debates, and presentations, which will help students stay up to date on current issues.

Course Objectives

By the completion of this course, students are expected to have achieved the following learning outcomes. They will be able to:

- describe the structure of federalism and the key features of the U.S. Constitution.
- understand the main ideas of the Founding Fathers and the philosophers and how their ideas influenced the creation of the Constitution.
- explain US political parties, their history and formation, and interest groups.
- articulate how campaigns and elections work in the United States and the state of Texas.
- discuss the media and how it influences political outcomes in the United States and the state of Texas.
- Outline how collective action by citizenry impacts policy outcomes and institutional rules in the United States and the state of Texas.

NOTE: The syllabus provides a general plan for the course, and changes may be necessary throughout the semester. Changes in the course syllabus, procedure, assignments, and schedule may be made at the discretion of the instructor. Any changes made to this syllabus will be announced in class and posted on D2L.

Course Requirements

Completing ALL the readings and regular attendance will be required of all students. Active participation in discussions is critical for students to succeed in this course.

| Assignment | Point | Notes |
|---|------------|--|
| Final exam | 40 | Online format |
| Midterm exam | 30 | Online format |
| Current event essays (2) | 10 (5 x 2) | 500 words (due: Feb 28 and Apr 18) |
| Movie reflection papers (2) | 10 (5 x 2) | 500 words each (due: Feb 7 and Apr 11) |
| Engagement (attendance + participation) | 10 | Online/offline participation |
| * Extra credit opportunity | Up to 3 | Current event essay presentation (10 mins) |

- 1. Exams (Midterm: 30 points / Final: 40 points):** Each exam will consist of multiple-choice questions and some short answer questions. Questions will test your understanding of the key concepts of American and Texas politics that will be covered in class. For both exams, I will utilize the Respondus Lockdown Browser and Respondus Monitor. A study guide will be provided before the exams.
- 2. Current event essays (10 points):** Students will choose 2 topical political issues over the semester and write a short analysis paper on them (500 words each). The topic may be any political/social issues in which you are interested or about which you have a strong opinion. A good paper must be critical and goes beyond a summary of the issue. Originality will be critical for your grade (similarity rate above 5% will be penalized). This assignment should be submitted electronically via D2L.
- 3. Movie reflections papers (10 points):** During the semester, we will watch 2 movies on American politics. You will be expected to respond to each of the movies in a short reflection paper (500 words). Again, your response must be critical and go beyond a summary or a description of those movies. Originality will be critical for your grade (similarity rate above 5% will be penalized). All papers should be submitted electronically via D2L.
- 4. Engagement with the course (10 points):** Your attendance and participation are vital to learning the material presented in this course. Without any change of university-wide COVID-19 policy, you will be expected to come to class prepared to engage thoughtfully, listen attentively, and interact with your peers respectfully. However, please do not come to class if you are feeling sick or you think you might have been exposed to COVID-19. Contact me (via email) and provide details about your situation at your earliest convenience for your absence to be excused. Over the course of the semester, 4 excused absences will be allowed for all students. More than 4 absences and unexcused absences may lower your final grade.

Your final grade will be based on the quality of assignments listed above. It will be determined using the following percentage scale:

A = 100 – 90 B = 89 – 80 C = 79 – 70 D = 69 – 60 F < 60

Desire-to-Learn (D2L)

All of the material for this course is located on the MSU D2L platform. Since all of the material for this course will be located on the MSU D2L platform, each student is expected to be familiar with this platform. You should regularly check D2L and the email hosted via D2L for important course information. If you experience any difficulties, please contact the IT technicians immediately and let me know your problems. DO NOT WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE TO TAKE QUIZZES OR EXAMS.

For your midterm and final examinations, I will utilize the Respondus Lockdown Browser and Respondus Monitor. In order to install these programs, you will need the following:

- **A desktop computer or laptop** other than a Chromebook. Chromebooks and mobile phones are NOT compatible with the Respondus Lockdown Browser and Monitor.
- **A working webcam on the computing device** used for the exam.
- **Microsoft Office or a compatible program** for written assignments. Access to Microsoft Office 365 is available through the Office 365 for Students on the Microsoft website.

Student Disability Services

Any student having an education disability plan on file with the university needs to inform me within the first week of the class, so I make the appropriate arrangements to accommodate your situation. In accordance with Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Midwestern State University endeavors to make reasonable accommodations to ensure equal opportunity for qualified persons with disabilities to participate in all educational, social, and recreational programs and activities. The students requiring accommodations should make application for such assistance through Disability Support Services, located in the Clark Student Center, Room 168, (940) 397-4140. Current documentation of a disability will be required. For more details, please go to Disability Support Services.

On Electronics and Courtesy

All electronic messaging devices must be turned off and stowed away by the time class begins: no e-mail/Facebook/text message checking, net surfing, etc. during class time. The use of laptops and tablets is prohibited in class except when explicitly permitted by the instructor. Out of courtesy to your classmates and your instructor, please come to class on time and do not leave until the class ends, unless you obtained prior permission, and do not engage in private conversations in class.

Textbooks

1. Benjamin Ginsberg, Benjamin, Margaret Weir, Theodore Lowi and Caroline Tolbert. 2019. *We the People*. 12th Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. [*"We the People"*]
2. Champagne, Anthony, and Edward Harpham. 2019. *Governing Texas: An Introduction to Texas Politics*. 4th Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. [*"Governing Texas"*]

Course Schedule

Week 1 – American Political Culture and the State of Texas

Questions: Why is government needed? What do Americans think about government? How has the social composition of the American population changed over time? Why does Texas' political culture matter?

Tuesday, January 12

- Introduction to the course

Thursday, January 14

- *We the People*, Chapter 1 (2-39)
- *Governing Texas*, Chapter 1 (pp. 2-43)
- Online discussion closes on January 17 (11:30 pm)

Week 2 – The Founding and the Constitution

Questions: What does government do and why does it matter? Why are taxes always controversial? Why has the Constitution changed over time? Is the American Constitution a model for the world?

Tuesday, January 19

- *We the People*, Chapter 2 (pp. 40-75)

Thursday, January 21

- *We the People*, Chapter 2 (pp. 40-75)
- Online discussion closes on January 24 (11:30 pm)

Week 3 – Federalism

Questions: Which level of government has had the most influence over citizens' lives? How have Supreme Court decisions affected the balance of power between the federal government and the states? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of a unitary system?

Tuesday, January 26

- *We the People*, Chapter 3 (pp. 76-113)

Thursday, January 28

- *We the People*, Chapter 3 (pp. 76-113)
- Online discussion closes on January 31 (11:30 pm)

Week 4 – The Texas Constitution

Questions: Why does the Texas Constitution matter? What are the main functions of state constitutions? What are the major provisions of the Texas Constitution? (Why) do we need to change it?

Tuesday, February 2

- *Governing Texas*, Chapter 2 (pp. 44-85)

Thursday, February 4

- **Movie Watching:** "Knock Down the House" (Netflix)
- A reflection paper should be submitted by February 7 (11:30 pm)

Week 5 – Texas in the Federal System

Questions: Why and how does federalism matter to Texas? Why do certain states receive more funding than others at different time periods? How do federal funds flow to Texas? Should the federal government be allowed to impose unfunded mandates on the states?

Tuesday, February 9

- *Governing Texas*, Chapter 3 (pp. 86-113)

Thursday, February 11

- *Governing Texas*, Chapter 3 (pp. 86-113)
- Online discussion closes on February 14 (11:30 pm)

Week 6 – Political Participation and Voting

Questions: Why did the US government denied participation to so many for so long? What forces influenced the expansion of voting rights? Why are upper-income Americans more likely to be voters than lower-income Americans?

Tuesday, February 16

- *We the People*, Chapter 8 (pp. 294-333)

Thursday, February 18

- *We the People*, Chapter 8 (pp. 294-333)
- Online discussion closes on February 21 (11:30 pm)

Week 7 – Political Parties

Questions: What rules governing the American electoral process promote a two-party system? How do parties attract the popular support they need to win elections? Should Texas make it easier for minor parties to gain political power?

Tuesday, February 23

- *We the People*, Chapter 9 (pp. 334-377)

Thursday, February 25

- *We the People*, Chapter 9 (pp. 360-377)
- Online discussion closes on February 28 (11:30 pm)
- **Current event paper #1 due on February 28 (11:30 pm)**

Week 8 – Political Parties in Texas

Questions: Would people be more or less inclined to participate in politics if politicians did not identify with particular parties?

Tuesday, March 2

- *Governing Texas*, Chapter 4 (pp. 114-147)

Thursday, March 4

- **Midterm**

Week 9 – Campaigns and Elections

Questions: How do district boundaries affect elections for the U.S. House and state legislatures? Is it fair that relatively small states, such as Iowa and New Hampshire have outsized influence in picking presidents? Do American political campaigns help voters make a decision?

Tuesday, March 9

- *We the People*, Chapter 10 (pp. 378-427)

Thursday, March 11

- *We the People*, Chapter 10 (pp. 378-427)
- Online discussion closes on March 14 (11:30 pm)

Week 10 – Campaigns and Elections in Texas

Questions: How do the rules for voting affect turnout among different groups of Texans? Why voter participation in Texas is the lowest in the nation? What can we do to increase voter participation in the short term? In the long term?

Tuesday, March 16

- *Governing Texas*, Chapter 5 (pp. 148-181)

Thursday, March 18

- *Governing Texas*, Chapter 5 (pp. 148-181)
- Online discussion closes on March 21 (11:30 pm)

Week 11 – Groups and Interests

Questions: What are the major types of interest groups and whom do they represent? How do interest groups and social groups organize? Why do the number of interest and advocacy groups has grown in recent decades?

Tuesday, March 23

- *We the People*, Chapter 11 (pp. 428-465)

Thursday, March 25

- *We the People*, Chapter 11 (pp. 428-465)
- Online discussion closes on March 28 (11:30 pm)

Week 12 – Interest Groups and Lobbying in Texas

Questions: What are the major types of interest groups in Texas and how do they influence Texas government? How do ordinary individuals influence Texas government?

Tuesday, March 30

- *Governing Texas*, Chapter 6 (pp. 182-211)

Thursday, April 1

- Holiday Break

Week 13 – Public Opinion

Questions: Why does the media focus on issues on which public opinion is sharply divided while there are in fact many issues on which Americans largely agree? Do liberals live in areas with other liberals and conservatives live in areas with other conservatives? What are the political consequences of geographic sorting?

Tuesday, April 6

- *We the People*, Chapter 6 (pp. 204-253)

Thursday, April 8

- **Movie Watching:** “13th” (Netflix)
- A reflection paper should be submitted by April 11 (11:30 pm)

Week 14 – Public Opinion and The Media

Questions: In recent years, a number of major media corporations have acquired numerous newspapers, television stations, and radio properties. Is media concentration a serious problem? Are there differences between how younger adults and older adults get their news?

Tuesday, April 13

- *We the People*, Chapter 7 (pp. 254-261)

Thursday, April 15

- *We the People*, Chapter 7 (pp. 254-261)
- **Current event paper #2 due on April 18 (11:30 pm)**

Week 15 – The Media

Questions: Does digital news coverage differ from traditional print and television media? What impact does digital media have on American politics? To what extent, do you think, the media biased?

Tuesday, April 20

- *We the People*, Chapter 7 (pp. 261-277)

Thursday, April 22

- *We the People*, Chapter 7 (pp. 261-277)
- Final Exam Review

Week 16 – Final Exam: April 27