

**Government 050**  
**Introduction to American Government**  
Spring Semester 2010  
Clark University

Jonas Clark 217  
Monday, Wednesday, and Friday 11-11:50  
Professor Robert Boatright  
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*Description*

This course is both an introduction to American national institutions and political processes and an introduction to the discipline of political science. We will survey the basic factors that influence American government, the major institutions of American national government and their relationship to each other, and we will look at the ways in which Americans' beliefs, attitudes, and preferences are translated into law.

As to the basic subject matter of this class, the course is designed to provide you with the basic knowledge and skills necessary to pursue further coursework in American politics. It is however, also organized around contemporary issues in American politics. We have all just observed what was undoubtedly one of the most exciting elections in recent American history, but it's not yet clear what this election means. Throughout the course, we will make reference to the ways in which this election may (or may not) have upended all of the things we thought we knew about voters, candidates, and political parties. We will use our discussion of these issues as a starting point for understanding public opinion, political participation, and the activities of political parties, interest groups, and the media. We will then turn our attention to political institutions – congress, the president, the federal bureaucracy, and the courts – in order to measure the role of politicians in creating the type of politics we have had over the past few years, and how all of that may have changed. Every time I teach this course, I try to use contemporary developments to frame the basic material we cover; this year, now that the euphoria over the 2008 election has subsided, it seems appropriate both to acknowledge that 2008 was different, but to also note some of the challenges that lie ahead. We will do this through consideration of the ways in which new voters – you – differ from their elders, and through consideration of some of the larger problems that you will all have to confront over the coming decades.

As to the political science aspect of the course, a major task of the class is to separate political punditry, or the accounts of politics we are used to reading on the editorial pages of the newspaper, to hearing on talk radio, to viewing on the tv news, or even on *The Daily Show* and in Hollywood films – from the types of accounts presented by political scientists. I am not necessarily trying to teach you that political scientists are “right” and Rush Limbaugh or Jon Stewart are wrong, but it is my hope that you will

leave this course with an understanding of how political scientists ask and answer research questions, and how one can move from the realm of political opinions towards truths about politics.

In order to meet both of these goals, most of the weeks of the semester will be organized as follows: On Mondays, we will consider basic facts about different aspects of American politics. For instance, we will discuss the historical development of particular government institutions, trends in public opinion over time, or some of the details of different parts of government. View this session as a brief civics lesson. On Wednesdays, we will consider political scientists' theories about *why* different political actors behave as they do or *why* aspects of our government have changed over time. For many of these class sessions, you will be required to develop your own research questions, drawing upon the background content and the approaches of political scientists to these issues. On Friday, we will discuss how one would study these aspects of government and what sorts of normative consequences we can draw from the week's subject.

There are no prerequisites for this course, and I will not expect any prior knowledge of American politics. I will, however, expect you to maintain an interest in current political developments. I strongly encourage you to pick up a copy of the *New York Times* every day and to familiarize yourselves with what is going on in national politics. Fortunately for us, this class coincides with what promises to be an unusually active period in American politics – the “honeymoon” of the Obama administration – so there will be a lot of political activity to explain. I will make reference to current political developments throughout the course, and I encourage you to think about these developments as we consider the material in the course. The relatively small size of this course (intro classes in our department tend to have fifty students, but we've cut down the size in order to help make discussions better) should give us ample time to discuss our views on all aspects of American politics, and your participation is vital.

The goals of this class, then, are to provide you with a basic understanding of American politics – an understanding that will enable you to step back from whatever partisan or ideological views you bring to it – and to help you to understand how to think about politics from the political scientist's point of view. If, after leaving this class, you choose to pursue further courses in the government department, you should have a firm grounding for doing so. Even if you do not elect to pursue further courses in government, however, this class should give you some of the skills to make you a savvier consumer of the political news and political rhetoric with which we are confronted every day.

### *What's up with the Clickers?*

During several of the class sessions, you will use handheld remote devices (“clickers”) to anonymously respond to questions I ask, and your responses will be instantly tabulated and displayed on screen. Several courses at Clark have been using these devices, and the Turning Point, or interactive Power Point, software that goes with

them, for the past couple years. This is my second go-around with them. I have found this software useful in this class for two reasons. First, we will at times be covering topics that some of you may be reluctant to voice an opinion on – questions that range from “did you do today’s reading?” to “Do you support same-sex marriage?” The software gives us the ability to get accurate measurements on questions that people may feel tentative about answering in front of their classmates. And second, the software gives us the opportunity to link question responses together. That is, while you will remain anonymous when you answer questions, each clicker is assigned a unique ID, so it will be possible to measure, for instance, how people who answered “yes” to one question responded to subsequent questions. In a nutshell, we can use them to introduce the type of research that quantitative political scientists do. I encourage you to give me your feedback on how we can best use them in the course.

### *Readings*

The following books are required for the course and are available at the bookstore:

Bianco, William T. *American Politics: Strategy and Choice*. New York: Norton, 2001.

Kernell, Samuel, and Gary C. Jacobson. *The Logic of American Politics*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 2009.

Dalton, Russell J. *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 2009.

Kerbel, Matthew. *Netroots: Online Progressives and the Transformation of American Politics*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009.

Page, Benjamin I., and Lawrence R. Jacobs. *Class War? What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

### *Requirements and Grading*

*Attendance and Participation.* The most important requirement for this class is your attendance and participation. In order to succeed in this course, you must attend class and you must come prepared to discuss the readings. Attendance will be taken, and attendance and participation will comprise ten percent of your grade.

*Exams:* There will be a midterm exam and a final exam for this class. Each will be worth twenty percent of your grade. The final will not be cumulative; that is, the midterm will cover our discussions of political behavior and your final will cover our discussions of political institutions. Both the midterm and the final will consist of short essay responses on the material we have read for class.

*Written Work:*

- a) *Research Questions:* You will complete six research questions over the course of the semester. For each of these questions, you will carefully consider the background material for that week, and you will also consider the ways in which political scientists have sought to use that material to ask research questions about politics. You will then formulate your own research question, explain why it is important and how it incorporates political scientists' knowledge of that issue, and lay out the steps you would follow to answer it. I do not expect you to ask questions that you already know the answers to, nor do I expect you to answer these questions in the assignments. I also do not expect you to fully understand how to write these questions at the beginning; this will be a learning experience, and I will expect the quality of your questions to improve as the semester goes on. These are exercises in learning how to ask political questions. Your research questions will, collectively, comprise forty percent of your grade, but improvement will count and your later questions will be weighted more heavily in your grade than your early questions. You should come to class on the Thursdays when these questions are due prepared to talk about your question; each of you will be asked to discuss your question at least once during the semester.
- b) *Short Research Essay:* At the conclusion of the class, you will write a five-page paper answering one of the research questions you have posed earlier in the course. We will discuss the content of this essay more as the semester progresses. This essay will comprise ten percent of your final grade.

You will not need to conduct extensive outside research for either your questions or your answers, but your questions and answers should nonetheless be written in a formal manner. Attached to this syllabus is a style sheet for your essays, which includes both requirements and suggestions. Following the guidelines here will result in a better grade for the course. Also, keep the following in mind when writing your research questions and your short research essay:

- All papers are due in class on the due date.
- You may turn in a paper late for one grade fraction per day (not including weekends) reduction. That is, an A drops to an A- when it is one day late, then to a B+ on the second day, and so on. *However*, failure to submit your papers in class will also factor into your participation grade – if you didn't submit your paper in class, I will assume you were not there.
- Papers with inadequate citation of the readings will be returned to you and will be subject to a one grade fraction per day reduction until I receive them back with proper citation.
- Unless you have authorization from me to do so, you may not email your papers to me. Emailed papers will be returned to you and will be subject to the one grade fraction per day reduction until I receive the printed copy from you.

*Summary:* Class Requirements and Percent Contribution to Final Grade:

<b>Requirement</b>	<b>Percent Contribution to Grade</b>	<b>Objective</b>
Class attendance and participation	10%	Ability to analyze and apply concepts
Research Questions	40% (roughly 7% each)	Understanding of material
Research Essay	10%	Ability to analyze and apply concepts
Midterm Exam	20%	Understanding of material
Final Exam	20%	Understanding of material

*A Note on Web Resources:*

- a) There is a lot of good political information available on the web. I will call your attention to some of this material from time to time. You should feel free to consult web-based resources as you wish. There is also, as you should know, a lot of bad material out there – factually incorrect material, or material that is infused with overly partisan or ideological views. Thus, if you wish to explore other sources, be an educated consumer. You are free to check with me on the value of any outside material.
- b) You do not, however, *need* to consult outside material for this course (except perhaps for your final essay). In no case will outside material serve as a substitute for the assigned readings.
- c) I may set up a blackboard site for this course, in order to encourage discussion or to have you share your research questions with your classmates.

*Academic Honesty:* Finally, as you should be aware by now, the work you do in this course must be entirely your own. To be sure we all have the same understanding of academic integrity as it pertains to this course, here is what the Academic Advising *Blue Book* (p. 22) has to say on the subject:

Academic integrity is highly valued at Clark. Research, scholarship and teaching are possible only in an environment characterized by honesty and mutual trust. Academic integrity requires that your work be your own. Because of the damage that violations of academic integrity do to the intellectual climate of the University, they must be treated with the utmost seriousness and appropriate sanctions must be imposed. The maintenance of high standards of academic integrity is the concern of every member of the University community.

**Plagiarism** refers to the presentation of someone else's work as one's own, without proper citation of references and sources, whether or not the work has been previously published. Submitting work obtained from a professional term paper writer or company is plagiarism. Claims of ignorance about the rules of attribution, or of unintentional error are not a defense against a finding of plagiarism.

Suspected plagiarism cases will be referred to the Dean's office. If you are in doubt about whether you have provided adequate citation or used others' work properly, please talk with me before handing your paper in!

## *Schedule*

January 20: Introduction to the Course

January 22: What is political science (or, how is this course different from a civics course?)

Bianco, Ch. 1-3

### **I. American Politics, Post-2008: How Much has Changed?**

January 25, 27, and 29:

Dalton, *The Good Citizen*, ch. 1-7

➔ Clark's Martin Luther King Day even will be on the 27<sup>th</sup>; we will likely not have class so you can go to that.

February 1 and 3:

Dalton, ch. 8-9, Epilogue

Handouts

February 5:

*Research Question #1 due at the beginning of class*

### **II. Political Behavior**

February 8 and 10: Public Opinion

Kernell and Jacobson, ch. 10

#### ***February 12:***

- Flex Day -

(We will either catch up on things if we've gotten a bit behind, do a library orientation session, or consider additional readings on current political issues)

February 15, and 17: Voting, Campaigns, and Elections

Kernell and Jacobson, ch. 11

Bianco, ch. 4, 5

February 19: *Research Question #2 due at the beginning of class*

February 22 and 24: Political Parties

Kernell and Jacobson, ch. 12

February 26:

- Flex Day -

Mellow, Nicole. "Voting Behavior: A Blue Nation?" In *The Elections of 2008*, ed. Michael Nelson (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 2009), pp. 145-162. (Handout)

Mayhew, David. "The Meaning of the 2008 Election." In *The Elections of 2008*, ed. Michael Nelson (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 2009), pp. 187-204. (Handout)

March 1 and 3: Interest Groups

Kernell and Jacobson, ch. 13

March 5:

*Research Question #3 due at the beginning of class*

March 8-12: No Class (Spring Break)

March 15 and 17: The Media

Kernell and Jacobson, ch. 14

***March 19: Midterm Exam***

*Interlude*

March 22, 24, and 26: Kerbel, *The Netroots*

### **III. Political Institutions**

March 29 and 31: Congress

Kernell and Jacobson, ch. 6

Bianco, ch. 6

April 2:

*Research Question #4 due at the beginning of class*

April 5 and 7: The Presidency and the Bureaucracy

Kernell and Jacobson, ch. 7, 8

Bianco, ch. 7

April 9:

*Research Question #5 due at the beginning of class*

April 12 and 14: The Courts

Kernell and Jacobson, ch. 9

Bianco, ch. 8

April 16:

*Research Question #6 due at the beginning of class*

April 19 and 21: Putting it all Together: The Separation of Powers and Federalism

Kernell and Jacobson, ch. 3

Other readings TBA

April 23: No Class

#### **IV. American Politics, Post-2008: How Far do we Still Have to Go?**

April 26, 28, and 30: Page and Jacobs, *Class War?*

May 3: Wrapping Up

*Short Research Paper due at the beginning of class*

***May x: Final Exam***

*A Few Tips on Writing*  
Professor Boatright  
Government 050

1. Spelling counts. Punctuation counts. Grammar counts. I don't want to spend time in this course on the mechanics of writing, in part because I assume that all of you are good writers. Most of the errors that I notice in students' papers are not made because students do not know how to write well. They are made because students did not proofread their papers carefully. If you take a few minutes to review your paper before turning it in, you will not only catch grammatical errors, but you will also have an opportunity to reconsider the clarity of your argument and the merit of your ideas. Plan your work so that you have time to complete your paper long enough before it is due that you can print it out and set it aside for a few hours, before giving it a final review.
2. The most important part of your paper is the thesis statement. Your thesis statement should appear in the first paragraph or two of your paper. It should succinctly present your original argument and let the reader know what the main point of your paper will be. A thesis statement is not, however, merely an explanation of how the paper is organized.
3. When discussing points in the readings, be sure to cite the book and the page number to which you are referring. For most of the papers in this class, I do not expect you to draw upon material other than the books assigned, so you do not need to supply full bibliographic information. Putting the author and page number in parentheses after the sentence in which you discuss their work is sufficient. For example, you might write  
Smith argued that the division of labor encouraged workers to attempt to perform their jobs as quickly and efficiently as possible (Smith, p. 11).  
Be sure not to confuse your own ideas with those in the texts; only cite the text where you are referring to a specific point made by the author.
4. *Do not use lengthy quotes.* The papers we will write in this class are too short for you to take up space reciting passages from the books we are reading. Quotes may be appropriate in instances where the author has used a particularly noteworthy or original term. If you were discussing Marx's views on the relations of the Communist Party to the working class, for example, you might write  
Marx claimed that the Communists must be aligned with the proletariat because they "have no interests separate and apart from the proletariat as a whole" (Marx, p. 483).
5. Be careful about referring to yourself in your papers. It is sometimes appropriate to write in the first person, but doing so is often a way of being tentative in your writing. You should not qualify your arguments by saying "I think that ..." It should be obvious what you think; the task of an expository essay is to convince the reader that you are right.
6. As you will certainly notice in the coming weeks, there is a distinctive "jargon" in political science. This is not a good thing. I am hopeful that none of you will feel compelled to adopt this jargon as your own. You should be careful, though, when using words that have a very precise meaning in the works we have read and another, less precise meaning outside the discipline. Always be sure that it is clear to the reader whether you are using these words in the discipline-specific context or not. And make sure you know what all the words you use mean!
7. *Do not be afraid to ask for help with your papers.* I have assumed in writing these comments that all of you are familiar with the basic principles of writing style. If you are not satisfied with your writing, ask a friend to look your papers over, ask a college writing tutor for help, or talk to me during office hours or by email. I also highly recommend purchasing the following books on writing style and mechanics:

Strunk, William, and E. B. White. 1979. *The Elements of Style*. Third Edition. New York: Macmillan.  
Williams, Joseph. 1989. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. New York: HarperCollins.  
Weston, Anthony. 1987. *A Rulebook for Arguments*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.