Merced College  
Fall 2013  

POSC-01-8697      Essentials of the American Political System  
Dr. Jon D. Carlson      W: 7-9:50pm  
E-Mail: jon.carlson@mccd.edu      Room: LB-B 106  
Jcarlson3@ucmerced.edu


Additional Readings as assigned (posted on course website).

Newspaper of repute: NYTimes, SacBee (for California Politics), LATimes.

**Course Description:** This course will introduce students to institutions of US national government, the US political system, and California state and local government. The course includes a study of the United States Constitution and its application to federal, state, and local government. Emphasis is placed upon various roles of national and state government, constitutional rights and obligations of citizens, and the evolution and development of California state political institutions. This course meets the United States Constitution requirement and the federal, California state, and local government requirement.

**Readings:** The main text will be the Berman textbook, but students will be expected on certain days to read materials other than the textbook (“opinion readings” for the week, etc). These readings will be posted on the course website. Students will be expected either to print out these readings and bring them to class, or to bring notes they have taken on these readings. Students will be expected to come prepared to discuss the readings. Be advised that the readings for this course are at an advanced level; while there is no English prerequisite to take this course, students will be required to read at the English 1A level.

**Course Statement/DSS statement:** This course is an introduction to the fundamentals of government and political processes at the national, state, and local levels. It includes a study of basic issues confronted by the American people and their governing institutions.

If you have a verified physical, medical, psychological, or learning disability or perhaps you feel you may have one, please contact the Disabled Student Services (DSS) office. DSS staff will review your needs and determine what accommodations are necessary and appropriate. All information and documentation is confidential. DSS is located in the Lesher Student Services Bldg., Room 234, phone 384-6155. In Los Banos, DSS is located in Building A, phone 381-6423.

**Course Objectives/Student Learning Outcomes:** In accordance with the department’s outline, upon completion of this course students should be able to compare competing theoretical approaches in political science, assess the dynamics of our political process, analyze and judge contemporary domestic challenges, understand civic responsibilities, demonstrate knowledge of civil rights and liberties, comprehend the Constitution and federal governmental system, critique significant political philosophies and contributors in the field, and analyze research findings and concepts within the American political system. Above all, this course is about the study of power and its role in constitutional government.

The two specific Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) that are assessed for this course are:

1. Identify the basic features of the United States Constitution.
2. Differentiate the major powers and processes of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.
**Teaching Philosophy (Carlson)**

**Heterodox**: Do not fear to dissent from the taken-for-granted or assumed “best” path. Question yourself; defend your point of view, without being dismissive of alternative positions or disrespectful of others. Use alternative ways of seeing to map the limitations of your own gaze, and to sharpen its focus. Recognize that learning is a process of *cooperative conflict*: ultimately, we argue with texts, distant authors, and each other in order to advance a dialogue, not to defend a dogma. If the instructor asks for clarification or pushes you to expand on a comment or position, he does so with this in mind, not to “make you feel dumb”.

**Intellectualism**: If you are in college or university, odds are good that you believe in the value of education. Indeed, knowledge is power. However, having an opinion (especially in Political Science courses) or a belief is not the same as having accurate knowledge. In fact, many of human kind’s most enduring conflicts are based on beliefs (religious or otherwise) that do not coincide with others’ beliefs. In this class I will ask you to develop the following skills:

1. **Embrace your ignorance**, then strive to overcome it. We learn by first recognizing there is a skill or body of knowledge that we do not have, then taking steps to rectify this. Many students have their academic progress stunted because they are afraid of “looking stupid” in front of their peers; we are all here to learn, act accordingly and overcome this fear!

2. **Question assumptions**: Part of being in college is to challenge belief systems and to think new, often scary thoughts. Question yourself and ask *WHY* you believe things that you believe. It is acceptable to have opinions, but the instructor will often ask you why you hold them; have a reason *why* you think what you think! Part of being human is our ability to recognize when we have been wrong, and change our viewpoint in light of new information. This can be incredibly powerful, even though ‘existential crises’ are often a disturbing aspect of being in university.

3. **Opposing views**: Part of being truly educated is the ability to hold two opposite viewpoints in your mind at the same time, understand both fully, and then be able to decide which is most favorable. This does *not* require you to agree with one, both, or either. Rather, you try to understand them in an objective manner. For example, in American politics we have a system dominated by two parties, which often leads to emotionally heated debates. One way to cut through the emotion of such situations is to mentally “switch” the labels associated with each position, and ask yourself if you would feel the same way if a Democrat (or Republican) was taking the position being contested. This can be especially fruitful in situations dominated by personality (such as a Presidency!). Be able to take personal views and emotions out of a debate and evaluate arguments critically.

**Course Requirements:**

**Requirements**: Students must read approximately one chapter per week. The specific requirements are as follows:

**Performance Evaluation Activities:**

1) **CLASS ATTENDANCE (15%)**: This is easy. I expect that you will attend all meetings of this class and I will take roll of the class every day. Since this is a weekly session, missing one class is roughly equivalent to missing an entire week during a standard semester. If a student misses a class, it is his or her responsibility to find out what material was covered, if any assignments were given, and if any alterations in the schedule were made. A tardy entrance to class will count as ½ of an absence, and will be tallied accordingly.

2) **CLASS PARTICIPATION (10%)** -- this may be new to you and will be worth 10 points toward your final grade. As outlined in the following schedule, we are going to read and discuss important aspects of American politics during this term. In addition, self evaluation of overall participation will be included in your final course participation grade. Honest and forthright feedback is required; feedback deemed not to be so will be discounted or thrown out.
3) **EXAMINATION(S) (50%)**: The frequency and number of exams will be determined during the first class meeting, through a practical exercise in democratic decision making.

→ Per our group’s overwhelming majority decision, there will be 5 exams throughout the semester (10% each)

**MAKE-UP EXAMS WILL NOT BE GIVEN.** The only exception to this rule is when the student can provide **written verification** of an illness, a family crisis, or some other extraordinary event. Letters from family or friends are unacceptable. Examples of written verification would be a note from a physician verifying an illness, an obituary verifying the death of a relative, or a police report.

4) **QUIZZES/HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENTS (25%)**: In-class quizzes/assignments will be given throughout the semester at the discretion of the professor. They may be given **AT ANY TIME** during the class period, or they may be made take-home as short writing assignments at the discretion of the professor, in which case the quiz/assignment is due at the beginning of the next class. If a student does not arrive before the last quiz/assignment is handed out, he or she will **NOT BE GIVEN A QUIZ/ASSIGNMENT. LATE QUIZZES/ASSIGNMENTS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.**

**Grades:**
Grades will follow the format:

| 93.3 – 100: | A |
| 86.7 – 89.9: | B+ |
| 83.3 – 86.6: | B |
| 80 – 83.2: | B- |
| Etc. |

**Under NO circumstances will so-called ‘extra credit’ work be granted.** I reserve the right to make updates and changes to the syllabus, with notice, during the semester.

**Plagiarism/Cheating:** Academic honesty will be rigorously enforced in this course. An instance of academic dishonesty will result in a ‘0’ on the assignment. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the following:

1. Plagiarism—the intentional or unintentional presentation of someone else's words, ideas or data as one’s own work.
2. Fabrication—intentional falsification or invention of research, data, citations, or other information.
3. Cheating—an act of deception in which a student represents mastery of information that he or she has not mastered. **USING A CELL PHONE/TEXTING DURING AN EXAM WILL ALWAYS BE CONSIDERED CHEATING.** If a student is suspected of sharing information with a fellow student, the exam will be confiscated, and he or she will be reported to the vice president of student personnel. In such a case, the professor reserves the right to ask the student to complete the remainder of the uncompleted exam.

**COURSE SCHEDULE (Modifications will be made if necessary)**

**WEEK 1 (08/14)**

**WEEK 2 (08/21)**

**WEEK 3 (08/28)**
W: Berman, Chapter 3: *Federalism.*

**WEEK 4 (09/04)**
W: Chapter 4: *Congress*  
1st Exam – end of class; Ch1-3
WEEK 5 (09/11)
W: Chapter 5: *The Presidency*.

WEEK 6 (09/18)
W: Chapter 6: *The Judiciary*.

WEEK 7 (09/25)
W: Chapter 7: *The Bureaucracy*. 2nd Exam – end of class; Ch 4-7

WEEK 8 (10/2)
W: Chapter 8: *Public Opinion*.

WEEK 9 (10/9)
W: Chapter 9: *Political Parties*

WEEK 10 (10/16)
W: Chapter 10: *Participation, Voting and Elections*. 3rd Exam – end of class; Ch 8-10

WEEK 11 (10/23)
W: Chapter 11: *Interest Groups*

WEEK 12 (10/30)
W: Chapter 12: *The Media*

WEEK 13 (11/6)
W: Chapter 13: *Civil Liberties*

WEEK 14 (11/13)
W: Chapter 14: *Civil Rights and Political Equality* 4th Exam – end of class; Ch 11-14

WEEK 15 (11/20)
W: Chapter 15: *Domestic and Economic Policy*

WEEK 16 (11/27)
W: Chapter 16: *Foreign Policy*.

WEEK 17 (12/4)

WEEK 18 (12/11) – 5th & ‘Final’ Exam: Ch 15-16 & California materials

FINAL EXAM: CHECK CATALOG FOR DATE AND TIME