

POLITICAL SCIENCE 215AB

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN AMERICAN POLITICS

SPRING SEMESTER 2011

INSTRUCTOR: LEIGHTON D. ARMITAGE, PH.D.

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BUILDING: 17, OFFICE: 123

OFFICE HOURS: TBA & BY APPOINTMENT

Catalogue Course Description

Explores within the constitutional framework, current issues of importance to well-informed citizens in a democracy, including goals and tactics of American foreign policy, presidential elections and campaigns, corporate power, criminal justice and individual rights, interpretations of the Framers' political philosophy, Congress

Course Objectives

The purpose of this course, stated briefly, is to acquaint you with some of the more important issues facing our national government both in terms of the historic perspective and in terms of today's realities. We will examine ideals and beliefs of the "framers" and what has become of their original prescriptions. One of the primary objectives of this course is to engage its students in critical thinking and to stimulate spirited yet civil discussions on the subject of government, politics and policies. It is our belief that democracy can only truly flourish in the presence of informed, discerning and critical judgment on the part of those governed, and that even a representative democracy (as opposed to a direct democracy) will benefit from such a constituency. To this end, you will be exposed to as wide a range of perspectives as possible in the brief time available, and will be expected to speak out and deliver forth your own considered understanding as well. Whether your views are from the right, or the left, or even from "out there," we will endeavor to make you comfortable in this course, where a spirit of open-mindedness is pretty much the only core requirement asked of you by your instructor. Our hope is that from this vital exchange of ideas and ideals, you will be able to form your own opinions and back them up with some measure of informed logic. Your instructor is of the belief that only such discerning critical judgment can pull us out of the small-minded policy impasses which our previous president and his administration backed us into, and from which president Obama is now trying to extricate us, with no help from the Republican party or the teabaggers.

Course Requirements

I. Attendance & Participation: Attendance at all class sessions is expected and indeed required of all students. Attendance is to be considered as a most vital part of the course, and will be strongly factored into the final course grade. Absences will only be excused in case of illness or for College-sponsored events. Excessive absences will be grounds for the instructor to drop any student, and unless a valid reason is given, arriving over 10 minutes late will in most cases be considered the equivalent of one absence. This may seem harsh, but late arrivals spoil the concentration of the class, tend to distract the instructor, and waste time; a most precious commodity. While civility and responsibility may no longer be expected of you in our society, they will be expected in this course. In this respect, as well, upon entering the classroom, you would be wise to turn off cell-phones, pagers, and other beeping instruments. Students are responsible for knowing the dates when a class may be dropped without penalty. A drop late in the semester will result in an overall grade of F. Because of the lack of flexibility on the part of Admissions and Records, there appear to be no exceptions to this rule, much though I deplore it. Outside of that, you will find that I am a rather generous or easy (depending on who you ask) grader (or at least I have been accused of this character flaw by several students in the past, and do not intend to remedy it anytime soon.)

As can be expected in a course of this nature, participation will also be expected of all students. The greatest proportion of the grade to be awarded for the course, will consist of a mix of **attendance** and **participation**. Impeccable but passive attendance (whether awake or asleep) is **in no way** a substitute for actively taking part in course discussions. You are encouraged to present and defend your views most vigorously and will never be penalized for taking a stand, which disagrees with that of the instructor. You are, however, encouraged to base your view on some variant of logic which can be defended, and to buttress your position with examples wherever possible.

II. Grades: Your course grade will be determined by a composite of several grades taken during the term. You will be expected to turn in some form of journal, in which you will generally indicate what you feel you have learned and which arguments most swayed your final judgment in your choice of 4 of the topics that we will be covering in the course. This will of course be in addition to participating in the course discussions which will be held during each class session, and in presenting (as group projects) one of the topics which we will choose to cover as well as a write-up of that presentation.

The grades will be factored as follows:

Journals	100pts
Presentations	100pts
Write-Up	150pts
Discussion Participation	150pts
Composite total	500pts

III. Reading Assignments: The reading assignments indicated in the syllabi for each week of the semester are mandatory and you are most strongly enjoined to have thoroughly **completed** these readings **prior to** each day's courses. This point is of great importance because a thorough reading of your assignments prior to classes will give you a much greater understanding of the facts and concepts you will be taught during course hours. This will feed directly into your ability to excel in the study of this subject. Although some of the assignments are more arduous than others, all have been pared down to the bare minimum to ensure comprehension of each week's topic. You are of course encouraged to broaden your understanding of the various topics by consulting optional readings, but will not be tested or quizzed directly based upon this additional material.

IV. Student Learning Objectives: The successful student, at the conclusion of this course will be able to:

1. Express their views about important National issues affecting the daily lives of Americans. For example: War, Terrorism, Gun Control, Education, Abolition of Electoral College, National ID's and Campaign Finance.
2. Critically analyze and argue for or against an issue and support either point of view.
3. Demonstrate knowledge of how ideology shapes important issues in the United States.
4. Understand the important role that corporations and the media play in framing National issues and debates about them.

V. Other Addenda: The asking of questions is highly encouraged, and time will be provided for question/answer sessions throughout the duration of the course. If you feel that your question has not been sufficiently addressed in the question/answer/discussion periods, you are by all means encouraged to pursue the question during my office hours, which are as yet not completely settled, but generally take place directly following classes. Office hours are provided for the benefit of the students and should be taken advantage of.

Finally, in cases of dissatisfaction with a grade received, students are requested to provide the instructor with a concisely (and, preferably, politely) **written** statement, explaining or justifying your objection with reference to the usual academic criteria involved in the grading of journals, presentations, write-ups, and participatory activity.

Readings and Course Outline

Readings

The required course textbook is:

George McKenna & Stanley Feingold, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Political Issues*, 16th Edition, Expanded, Boston: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2009. ISBN # 978-0-07-812752-6

For those interested in ancillary (and as the word implies, purely optional) reading, the following textbook comes highly recommended:

Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the Few*, 9th Edition, New York: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2011.
ISBN # 978-0-495-91127-2