

INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN GOVERNMENT
George Mason University
GOVT 103 001 (CRN 70928)
Tuesday/Thursday 10:30am – 11:45am
Lecture Hall 1
Fall 2017

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I. Course Description

This course provides students with an introduction to American political institutions and public policy formation. No prerequisite classes or prior knowledge are required to enroll. The course is divided into four sections. In the first section, we examine the history of the formation of American government and the theoretical explanations for the existence of government. In the second section, we examine the institutions of government, such as the U.S. Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Presidency. In the third section, we explore the behaviors associated with government and the mechanisms by which political behaviors are expressed (e.g., voting, public opinion, interest groups, political parties, etc.). In the final section, we will examine U.S. foreign, economic, and social public policy.

II. Course Goals

This course is designed to meet three primary objectives. First, I hope to stimulate your **curiosity** about government and politics and provide you with a life-long desire to be an informed, critical, and active citizen. Second, I hope students will develop a base level of **knowledge** and understanding about the institutions that form our government, the incentives of political actors, and the interactions between the two. Third, the course is designed to help students improve their analytical and critical thinking **skills**.

III. Course Requirements and Graded Evaluation

There are five graded requirements for this course, described below. Grades will be calculated on a non-curved typical A-F scale where,

97-100 A+	87-89 B+	77-79 C+	67-69 D+	< 60 F
93-96 A	83-86 B	73-76 C	63-66 D	
90-92 A-	80-82 B-	70-72 C-	60-62 D-	

Quizzes (15%) Nearly every class meeting will be accompanied by a quiz that highlights the main points from lectures and readings assigned on that day. Quiz instructions will be given verbally in class, thus providing a strong incentive for attendance and participation. Students will access these quizzes electronically via *Blackboard*. **Each quiz will only be available on the day it is assigned**; activities must be completed in the window of time after class ends and before midnight on the same day. Students are encouraged to download the free *Blackboard* application for their smart phones or tablet devices because sometimes we will have time to do quizzes together in class (but please see policy below on electronic devices in the classroom). The lowest *two* quiz scores will be dropped for each student. **It is not possible to make up missed points for quizzes.**

Midterm Exams (25% each) There will be TWO midterm exams. Each exam will be multiple-choice format (closed book, closed note). Questions will be based on material presented in class and in the readings. The exams will be in-class on **Thursday, September 28 & Thursday, October 26**. These are the **ONLY** days to take the exams. If you do not come to class on this day or you arrive after the first person to complete the exam has finished, you will not be allowed to take the exam.

Final Exam (35%) This will be a comprehensive, in-class exam covering material from the entire course. The exam will be multiple-choice format (closed book, closed-note). Questions will be based on material presented in class and in the readings. The exam will be in-class on **Tuesday, December 19, 10:30am – 1:15pm**. This time has been designated by the University and cannot be changed; it is the **ONLY** date and time to take the exam. If you do not come to class on this day or you arrive after the first person to complete the exam has finished, you will not be allowed to take the exam.

IV. Missing and Late Work

If you are aware that you will miss an exam you must notify the instructor *at least two days* prior to the due date or exam date. Make-up exams are conducted at the instructor's discretion and are granted only in extraordinary circumstances, such as a verified illness (with doctor's note) or family emergency (be prepared to provide documentation). Make-up exams will be closed-book essay exams.

V. Following Political Developments in the Media

Students are encouraged to follow current political events. A familiarity with current happenings around you will facilitate your ability to understand the material. Along with any local papers you may read, I recommend that you read *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* or *The Washington Post* DAILY. You can sign up to receive daily e-mail news updates from the *New York Times* or *The Washington Post* on their websites. Additionally, you may want to examine news-magazines for more in-depth coverage of particularly salient issues and events.

Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report and *National Journal* are two particularly informative periodicals. Other options include *Politico*, *VOX*, *Newsweek*, or *The Economist*. You can also

subscribe to podcasts where you can listen to headlines from these news sources (I recommend, “The Weeds, (Vox)” “Five Thirty-Eight Politics,” “Up First” (NPR), “NPR Politics Podcast,” and “Slate’s Political Gabfest.”). Finally, I strongly encourage students to listen to NPR at 88.5 (WAMU), where “Morning Edition” (5am-9am) and “All Things Considered” (4pm-6pm) provide excellent current events information.

Professor Victor’s Top 5 News Websites

Name	URL	Description
<i>New York Times</i>	http://www.nytimes.com	General national news and current events.
<i>Washington Post</i>	http://www.washingtonpost.com	General national news, with a concentration on events in Washington, D.C.
Politico	http://www.politico.com/	General political news
Congressional Quarterly Politics	http://www.cqpolitics.com	News about Congress, events on Capitol Hill, and government.
<i>National Journal</i>	http://www.nationaljournal.com	News about Congress, elections, and important people in government.

VI. Student Responsibilities

A. *Class Attendance and Participation.* Learning is an *active*, rather than *passive*, exercise. Accordingly, every student is expected to attend class as well as be prepared to ask questions about and comment on the readings. You need to complete the daily reading assignment *prior* to the class meeting. You will be much more successful in this class if you attend regularly, take notes, pay attention, and participate.

B. *Readings.* As is the case with attendance, keeping pace with the reading is essential to succeeding in this class. It is *your* responsibility to obtain copies of the readings prior to the date we will discuss them in class. I will do everything I can to make this task easier for you. You will be much more successful in this course if you complete the assigned readings and *take notes on them.*

C. *Technology.* **Students may not use laptop computers, tablets (such as iPads), and smart phones in class,** except when instructed to do so. The costs associated with electronic distractions, to you and those around you, outweigh the benefits of immediate supplementary classroom information. Students may use specific instructional applications, such as *Blackboard*, only when instructed to do so. However, students may not use laptops or other devices on a general basis in this class. If these restrictions pose a challenge for you, please discuss it with me. For more information on the benefits of taking notes by hand, see [this](#).

D. *Cheating, Plagiarism, and Academic Integrity.* Students in this course will be expected to comply with the George Mason University Honor Code (see <http://honorcode.gmu.edu/>).

There are three simple guidelines to follow with respect to academic integrity: (1) all work you submit must be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the expectations for any assignment, ask for clarification. Any student engaged in any academic misconduct *will receive an F on the offending exam or assignment*. Egregious violations will result in an F grade for the course and will be reported to the appropriate Dean's office. These violations include cheating on an exam, using someone else's work as your own, and plagiarizing the written word. Plagiarism (using someone else's words or ideas without providing credit or citation) is a serious offense. *If you have any questions at all about what constitutes cheating, plagiarism, or academic misconduct, please ask the instructor.*

E. Students with Disabilities. If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please let me (the instructor) know and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at (703) 993-2474 or <http://ods.gmu.edu>. All discussions with me regarding disabilities are confidential.

VII. Reading Assignments

There is one required book for this course and it is available at the campus bookstore. This text is also available on reserve at the Gateway Library in the Johnson Center. You may borrow this copy of the text for two hours at a time.

Lowi, Theodore J., Benjamin Ginsberg, Kenneth A. Shepsle, and Stephen Ansolabehere. 2017. *American Government: Power and Purpose*, FULL 14th ed. (with policy chapters). New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

VIII. Course Schedule and Reading Assignments

Tues., Aug. 29 Introduction to the Course

RULES OF THE GAME: THE FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

Thurs. Aug. 31 **NO CLASS TODAY**
(Professor will be at Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA)

Tues., Sept. 5 Why Government?
Readings: Lowi, et al., Chapter 1 ("The Five Principles of Politics")

Concentration *Define government and politics.*
Questions: *What are the two elements of every government?*
 What are the three primary purposes of government?
 What is a collective action problem?

Thurs., Sept. 7 The Constitution
Readings: Lowi, et al., Chapter 2 ("Constructing a Government")
 Lowi, et al., The Constitution of the United States of America (see Appendix)

Concentration Questions:

*What was America's first constitution called?
Why did the Articles of Confederation fail?
What were some of the compromises reached in the drafting of the Constitution?
How was the Constitution the solution to a collective action problem?*

Tues., Sept. 12 & Thurs., Sept. 14
Readings:

Federalism and Pluralism
Lowi, et al., Chapter 3
Lowi, et al., Federalist No. 10 (see Appendix)
Lowi, et al., Federalist No. 51 (see Appendix)

Concentration Questions:

*What is federalism?
What were the circumstances in McCulloch v. Maryland?
Are Madison's suggestions for quelling the violence of factions reasonable? Why or Why not?
How does Madison think we should control the effects of factions?
In Federalist No. 51, why does Madison think that government responsibilities should be divided?
What "evil" is Madison worried about? Why?
How does Madison think we can prevent tyranny of the majority?*

Tues., Sept. 19
Readings:

Cooperation in Politics
"Cooperation in Politics," Chapter 3 of *American Politics, Strategy and Choice*, by William T. Bianco (2001), W.W. Norton & Co., Inc.
Available on Blackboard.

Concentration Questions:

*How can you find an equilibrium in a prisoners' dilemma?
How is a prisoners' dilemma a collective action problem?
What are some solutions to a collective action problem?*

Thurs., Sept. 21
Readings:

Civil Liberties
Lowi, et al., Chapter 4

Concentration Questions:

*What is the difference between civil rights and civil liberties?
What liberties does each Amendment in the Bill of Rights protect?
What legal test must the government satisfy to legally restrict speech?
What legal standard is used to determine whether government has violated the religious establishment clause?
Can you recite the First Amendment?*

Tues., Sept. 26
Readings:

Civil Rights
Lowi, et al., Chapter 5

Concentration Questions: *Where in the Constitution does one find their right to “equal protection” under the law?*
What were the Civil War Amendments?
What is the significance of Plessy v. Ferguson and Brown v. Board of Education?
Is affirmative action legal? What type?
What guarantees women a legal right to vote? When was this guarantee made?
Which classes of Americans still experience illegal discrimination? And legal discrimination?

Thurs., Sept. 28 **MIDTERM EXAM I**

INSTITUTIONS: RULES, POLITICIANS, AND GOVERNMENT

Tues., Oct. 3 & Congress
Thurs., Oct. 5
Readings: Lowi, et al., Chapter 6 (“Congress”)

Concentration Questions: *What are the steps in the lawmaking process?*
Where does one find the Rules Committee and what does it do?
What are some major differences between the House and Senate?
What is a filibuster?
What is a logroll? What is a Gerrymander?

Tues. Oct. 9 **No Class, Monday classes held today**

Thurs., Oct. 12 The Presidency
Readings: Lowi, et al., Chapter 7 (“The Presidency as an Institution”)

Concentration Questions: *What is the difference between being a head of state and a head of government?*
Under what conditions can the President claim “executive privilege?”
What is an “executive order”? A “signing statement”? An “executive agreement?”
Does the President make the federal budget?
Can the President take the country to war?

Tues., Oct. 17 The Bureaucracy
Readings: Lowi, et al., Chapter 8 (“The Executive Branch”)

Concentration Questions: *How many cabinet secretaries are there?*
In which Department can one find the National Park Service? The Forestry Service?

What is the OMB?
What is a government corporation? What is an example of one?
By what means does Congress oversee the bureaucracy?
Who is the Secretary of Defense?

**Thurs., Oct. 19 &
Tues. Oct. 24** The Judiciary

Readings: Lowi, et al., Chapter 9 (“The Federal Courts”)

Concentration Questions: *What is the significance of Marbury v. Madison?*
What Act of Congress created the federal judiciary system?
*What are the rules of access a case must satisfy before the
Supreme Court will hear it?*
What is the “rule of four?”
What is the majority opinion?
By what means do interest groups attempt to influence the Court?
Who are the current Justices serving on the Supreme Court?

Thurs., Oct. 26 **MIDTERM EXAM II**

PEOPLE AND POLITICS: VOTING, PARTICIPATION, AND GOVERNMENT

**Tues., Oct. 31 &
Thurs., Nov. 2** Public Opinion

Readings: Lowi, et al., Chapter 10 (“Public Opinion”)

Concentration Questions: *In polling, how can one obtain a representative sample?*
What is measurement error?
What are some common beliefs among liberals? Conservatives?
What is an attitude and where does it come from?
What is political socialization?
*Do individuals tend to have consistent and stable opinions? If not,
how can we measure public opinion?*
What types of issues do Americans tend to agree on?

**Tues., Nov. 7 &
Thurs., Nov. 9** Elections, Voting, and Campaigning *(NOV 7 is ELECTION DAY!)*

Readings: Lowi, et al., Chapter 11 (“Elections”)

Concentration Questions: *When were African Americans guaranteed suffrage?*
What guaranteed 18-year-olds the right to vote?
Is it rational to vote? What is the “paradox of voting?”
How do citizens overcome the adverse selection problem?

*What type of people are more likely to vote?
Has turnout decreased or increased in recent years? Why?
What is “rational ignorance?”
What is FECA? BRCA?
How much money can an individual legally give to a candidate for
office?*

**Tues., Nov. 14 &
Thurs., Nov. 16**

Political Parties

Readings:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 12 (“Political Parties”)

*Concentration
Questions:*

*What is Duverger’s Law?
What are the five party systems? Which parties and features
characterize each system?
Which coalitions of voters do the modern Republican and
Democratic parties include?
What is the median voter theorem?*

**Tues., Nov. 21 &
Tues., Nov. 28**

Interest Groups

Readings:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 13 (“Groups and Interests”)

*Concentration
Questions:*

*Do interest groups tend to serve an inherently positive or negative
role in American politics?
Which characteristics describe groups that desire public goods?
And private goods?
How do groups overcome the collective action problem?
What is a PAC? Which characteristics describe most PACs?*

Thurs., Nov. 30

Media and Politics

Readings:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 14 (“The Media”)

*Concentration
Questions:*

*Which major events and technological advances significantly
changed the way Americans learn about the nation/world in the
20th century?
How can a consumer determine whether the news source to which
they are paying attention is a reliable one?
What is the best way to become/remain an informed citizen?
What makes a good campaign advertisement?*

Tues., Dec. 5

Public Policy: Economic Policy (24)

Readings:

Lowi, et al., Chapter 15 (“Economic Policy”)

Concentration Questions:

*What is laissez-faire economics?
Under what conditions does government regulate?
Which characteristics describe an inefficient or failed market?
What is the difference between fiscal and monetary policy?
What tools does government have to stimulate a slowed economy?
What is the “Fed” and what does it do?*

Thurs., Dec. 7

Readings:

Public Policy: Social Policy & Foreign Policy
Lowi, et al., Chapter 16 (“Social Policy”)
Lowi, et al., Chapter 17 (“Foreign Policy”)

Concentration Questions:

*What trends describe poverty in America?
What is TANF? EITC?
How is Social Security funded?
What is the difference between Medicare and Medicaid?
What started/ended the Cold War?
What is the primary goal of American foreign policy?
What are the instruments of modern American foreign policy-makers?
What is the IMF? World Bank? United Nations?*

Tues., Dec. 19

FINAL EXAM 10:30am-1:15pm