Political Science 4990 Course Syllabus: Version 1.0
Senior Seminar
Fall 2021

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Course Description

Political Science 4990 is an advanced course intended for Political Science majors with
strong preparation in U.S. government. Most fundamentally, the course explores the prospects for,
and obstacles to, effective and democratic governance in the U.S.

The Political Science literature of the mid 20th century depicted U.S. government as a
reasonable approximation of democracy that, for the most part, made policy effectively.
Responding to perpetual budget deficits, unsuccessful military adventures abroad, and policy
initiatives that consistently failed to attain their goals, scholars became far more critical of U.S. policy
making by the 1970s and 1980s. More recently, an increasing number of scholars have begun to
question the viability of democracy in the U.S. Trends that alarm these scholars include growing
economic (and therefore, political) inequality, increasing public disillusionment with democracy, and
a “culture war” that has intensified to the point that we can no longer as a nation agree over what
constitutes reality.

This section of Political Science 4990 will explore these deeply troubling trends in the U.S.
political system. We will begin the course by exploring the political beliefs, values, hopes for
government, fears of government, and expectations about government, that students carry into the
course. The class will read, and we will discuss selections from John. R. Hibbing’s Predisposed and
Johnathan Haidt’s the Righteous Mind– which explore the biological, evolutionary and moral
foundations of political beliefs and values.

The course will then shift away to from these personal perspectives to a focus on the entirety
of U.S. government, and to consideration more generally of what realistic benchmarks for
“democratic” and “effective” government might be, and whether democracy in the U.S. really is
threatened. Our discussions will center first what is possible in the governance of human
societies—questioning the prevalent assumption that personal liberties and democracy are somehow
natural or inevitable. We will consider how the U.S. public perceives government and what the
public expects from it. The constitutional foundations, modern character, and reimagination of
Congress, the Presidency, and the U.S. political party system will receive extensive evaluation. We
will address the following hypotheses:

1. The perceived failings of U.S. government are largely illusory; the U.S. is the richest, most
powerful, and most democratic nation in world history, and, by any reasonable measure, a success.
Those who perceive that U.S. government is failing expect too much of government and too much
of democracy, and they need to recognize that our system has weathered storms of greater severity
in the past.
2. The U.S. has achieved much as a nation, but it is an empire in decline, and the decline can be attributed to design of our political institutions. Neither our culture and nor our economic system can be held responsible for governmental failures; our political institutions are inadequate to meet the challenges of governance in the 21st century.

3. The U.S. has achieved much as a nation, but it is an empire in decline. The decline should not, however, be attributed primarily to the failings of U.S. political institutions. The problems originate in the U.S. economic system (or in the global economic system). Economic inequality and/or social or cultural stresses produced by capitalism haves caused dysfunctions in our political system.

4. The U.S. has achieved much as a nation, but it is an empire in decline. The problems do not, however, originate so much in U.S. political institutions so much as they so in the evolution of U.S. culture. Excessive individualism, and/or collectivism, and or materialism, and/or narcissism, and/or entitlement, and/or social paranoia and/or moral decadence and/or culture changes resulting from technology have undermined our political system.

5. The U.S. has achieved much as a nation, but it is an empire in decline. The problems rest not with U.S. political institutions per se, but instead with our national aspiration to operate a political system as a democracy. Democracy is an unattainable goal, and/or democracy and effective government are contradictory goals. As President John Adams predicted: “Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.”

6. Democracy and effective government were once attainable goals, but they are no longer. The complexity of human life in the 21st century overwhelms citizens with information, and it is no longer possible to have an informed voting population—a prerequisite to democracy.

We will conclude the course by evaluating the prospect for reform of the U.S. political system proposals to ease the constitutional language pertaining to constitutional amendments, to establish mandatory voting, to reduce the electoral demands on voters, to create national ballot propositions, to reform the campaign finance system, to do away with congressional districts entirely and to elect the U.S. House “at large,” to lengthen congressional terms, to expand the U.S. Senate to equalize state representation, to repeal the U.S. Senate Debate Rule, ending filibusters, to modify the presidential nominating process, to enlist former presidents and vice presidents into the U.S. Senate, and to do away with or to modify the Electoral College.

Course Format

The first twelve weeks of the course will primarily be devoted to class discussion focused on reading and paper assignments related to the themes introduced above, with occasional power point presentations/lectures by the instructor. Three or four class days toward the end of the course will be devoted to student presentations, and with one class day set aside for reconsideration one of our core hypotheses about our current standing as a nation.

In contrast with other sections of P.S. 4990, this section will not require students to write an extensive research paper. Instead, this section will focus on reading and discussion, with short papers and quizzes on readings designed to support and stimulate discussion.
Course Learning Objectives

1. To provide students with a theoretical and comparative perspective on the relationship between the U.S. electoral system, the U.S. Constitution, U.S. national institutions, political power, U.S. political culture, political incentives, and political outcomes in U.S. government.
2. To stimulate independent and creative thinking about U.S. government and its impact on our society and the world generally.
3. To develop analytical skills and writing skills in students, and to prepare them for careers in which they will be required to apply theory to data, think rigorously, and to write intelligibly.

Readings

One book is required for purchase, America's Failing Experiment, by Kirby Goidel. You can buy all three books at www.amazon.com. Other course reading assignments will be drawn from a variety of eclectic sources.

Papers

There will be three short paper assignments. In the first, each student will engage in a political self assessment, reflecting on origins of his or her political views and identifying possible fallacies or blind spots that may exist within these views. The paper will be due around September 22 or 27 will be worth 30 points, accounting for 15% of each course grade.

The second paper will require each student to summarize their findings in a survey that the class will design and conduct. Our objective with this survey will be to gain perspective on how the typical “non political” person sees life in the U.S. and the U.S. political system today, grounding our discussions in the reality U.S. public opinion. This paper will be due around October 13 or 18, be worth 20 points, and account for 10% of each course grade.

In the third paper, each student will apply course reading assignments and discussions to the six hypotheses presented on the first two pages of the syllabus. Each student will select one hypothesis as the most valid, arguing either that our national problems are mostly imaginary, or that they mostly stem from defects in our political institutions, or that they mostly emanate from our economic system, or that they mostly reside in our culture, or that the main cause of or problems is the complexity of life in the 21st century. Students will also select the hypothesis they regard as least valid. This paper will be worth 30 points (15% of each course grade) and be due just before Thanksgiving.

No research is required for these papers, and citations are unnecessary. The target length for the first paper and third papers will be 1000-1250 words, with a target of 750-1000 words for the second. These will not be strictly enforced limits, but I will penalize you if you significantly exceed the target length as the result of irrelevancy, or writing that is wordy or essentially devoid of content. In other words, you can make your papers as long as you wish, so long as you really need the words to express ideas responsive to the assignment.
Class Presentations

During the last six weeks of the semester, I will divide the class into 3-4 groups, each with 3-4 students, depending upon the final class enrollment. Each group will compose "A Plan to Restore America" and present its plan to the class during the first three class meetings after Thanksgiving, November 29, and December 1 and 6.

These plans can focus on the reform of political processes, the institution of new public policies, or on cultural or economic goals. The most important consideration in my evaluation of each plan will be how well it is grounded in the theoretical issues and reform proposals raised in the literature we have read in the course. Logical coherence, originality, and the organization and fluidity each presentation will also be important grading criteria. We will allow 20 minutes for each presentation, with another 15 minutes for questions and class discussion. These class presentations will account for 15% of each course grade, with two bonus points for each member of the group that, in my view, presents the best plan.

Participation

Students will be given one or more key questions, usually drawn from reading assignments, to consider in preparation for each class discussion, and every student will be expected to participate in class discussions every day. Students will be encouraged to think independently and to express their ideas accordingly, and evaluation of participation will be based on thoughtfulness, originality, and demonstrated knowledge of readings, not upon agreement with any particular perspective on theory or on the issues. Participation will account for 20% of each course grade. Because participation in discussions is impossible without being in attendance, attendance will be a significant factor in course grades.

Quizzes on the Readings

At various times during the semester, I will begin the class with a brief written quiz on some aspect of the assigned readings for that class day. The purpose of these quizzes will be to ensure that students actually complete the reading assignments prior to class, as experience has demonstrated to me that class discussions suffer when students fail to do readings and then pretend in discussion to know what they are talking about—or, alternatively, when they try to avoid talking at all because they fear being exposed. Demonstrated comprehension of assigned readings and related theoretical issues will be the preeminent grading criterion on these quizzes. Altogether, there will be six such quizzes, each worth 10 points. I will drop the lowest one quiz score during each student's grade computation. The quizzes will account for 25% of each course grade in the aggregate. There will be no make up quizzes.

P.S. 4990 Course Grade Components: A Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper #1: Origins of Political Perspectives</th>
<th>Possible Points</th>
<th>Percentage of Course Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paper #2: Survey Findings</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Project</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quizzes on Readings 50 25%
Class Attendance and Participation 40 20%

Grade Computations

There are 200 points possible in the course grading. Certain patterns of academic performance occasionally cause me to award a grade higher than the table below indicates. In no case will a student in any point range receive a grade lower than the grade indicated in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final Score</th>
<th>Final Grade No Lower Than</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90.0% - 100%</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88.5% - 89.9%</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87.0% - 88.4%</td>
<td>B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80.0% - 86.9%</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78.5% - 79.9%</td>
<td>B-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77.0% - 78.4%</td>
<td>C+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70.0% - 76.9%</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66.0% - 69.9%</td>
<td>C-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60.0% - 65.9%</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Students who with scores lower than 60.0% will normally fail the course.

Canvas

The course syllabus, course reading assignments, and other course information will be available on canvas.

Disabled Students

If a student has a disability that will likely require some accommodation by the instructor, the student must contact the instructor and document the disability through the Disability Resource Center, preferably during the first week of the course.

Snack of the Week?

Course Outline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meetings</th>
<th>Discussion Topics</th>
<th>Reading Assignments (Subject to Revision)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 30-Sept. 1</td>
<td>I. What is Right and What Is Wrong in the U.S. Today</td>
<td><em>America's Failing Experiment</em>, Introduction, ch. 1</td>
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</tbody>
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