POL 105: AT A GLANCE

Course title: American Government: The Midterm Elections [CRN 8360]
Instructor: Paul Dawson, Professor of Politics (Paul.Dawson@oberlin.edu)
Class Meeting times: Tuesday & Thursday 8:00 am – 9:50 am
Office hours: Tuesday 10-11:30 in Rice 230/Thursday 4:30-6 in Azariah’s (1st floor, Mudd library)
Credit hours: 4
Course description: This course is concerned with what has been and remains the fundamental issue of American political life: What should government do? (And not do?) Through a Socratic method, discussion of daily issues of the New York Times, academic materials, policy cases, and in-class simulations, we will inductively arrive at, test, and apply fundamental principles about the nature and operation of the American political system. In the fall of 2010, two research projects are required: one before the midterm elections, predicting the outcome of a congressional election of your choosing, and a subsequent one, explaining the actual outcome.
Class Meeting place: King 106
Required course reading: New York Times (Monday-Friday), plus a few articles. No text books. [NOTE: Sign up, with a check for $ 33, at Gibson’s Bakery.]
Recommended course reading: Available online or at Electronic Reserve (ERes @ https://eres.cc.oberlin.edu) [NOTE: By using an online version of the syllabus, hyperlinks will take you directly to readings.]
Course objective: The primary objective is to increase your understanding of American government, by teaching you to think analytically about the dynamics that drive the political system.
Course requirements [as a percentage of final grade]:
- Participation [33%]
- Midterm and Final exams [33%]
- Research project predicting and explaining a 2010 congressional election of your choosing [34%]

How to do well in this course: See “Details on course requirements”, below.
Other course requirements:
1. **Pay a fee if you’re late.** For purely pedagogical purposes, there is a tardy policy: if you are late to class, as defined by the Instructor’s watch, you will pay $ 1 to the Class Treasurer, without comment and before you take your seat. If you wish to give your word you will happily comply with this policy, please signify that by not dropping this course. REMINDER: This is a course requirement; failure to comply will result in a failing grade.
2. **Photo.** On a 3x5 card, tape a photo (or copy of a photo) and, on the reverse side, PRINT your full name and add something unique about you. **DUE: Thursday, Sept. 9, in class.**

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Available at a reduced rate at Gibson’s Bakery. (You will need your own hard copy.)
DETAILS ON COURSE REQUIREMENTS: Participation, Exams, Research Project

- **Participation.** To participate well in class …
  1. Attend every class
  2. Arrive on time
  3. Read the *New York Times* daily
  4. On Tuesday, September 14, sign up for a study group/tutor.
  5. Meet with your study group/tutor on a regular basis.
  6. In your study group and with your tutor, practice analyzing *New York Times* stories; i.e., ask of them the questions below (in point 8).
  7. After your study group meets with your tutor, schedule a meeting for your group and tutor with the Instructor. (At least one such meeting is required.)
  8. To analyze a *NYT* story or a case – by yourself, in your study group, and in class when I call on you – answer the following six questions:
     1. What’s the issue? (I.e., that which people disagree about)
     2. Who are the stakeholders? (I.e., those who care about the issue)
     3. What are the stakeholders’ positions? (I.e., what do they want government to do?)
     4. What values are at stake? (What values will be served by governmental involvement? What values will be suppressed?)
     5. What do you think government should do in this case? Why?
     6. **So what?** I.e., what do your answers to the above questions reveal or suggest about:
        - Politics?
        - Government?
        - Public policy?
        - The policy making process?

- **Exams:** On both the midterm and the final exam, there is one question, in three parts:
   “**What, if anything, should government do (about the situation described in the newspaper clipping that is attached to this exam), why should it do that, and, from your answer, what inferences do you draw about American government, politics, public policies, and the policy making process?**”

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2 In this question, “what” refers to both the process by which some governmental policy is made and the outcome of that process: i.e., the policy itself. Moreover, as you will learn, the process is often more important than the outcome.

3 “So what?” is a question that calls for you to make an inductive leap. To do so, re-read your answer to the “what” and “why” parts of the exam question, and then, on the basis of what you have written, draw new inferences about American government, politics, public policies, and the policy making process. Drawing inferences is much more than simply summarizing or restating what you already have written. At this point in your answer, DO NOT SUMMARIZE OR MERELY RESTATE. As a caveat, you also should know this step is the most difficult part of the exam; it usually differentiates a good from a great answer. To learn to do this well, practice.
To prepare for exams, practice with current news stories, in your study group and with your tutor. (Discuss orally, write out answers, and critique each others’ answers.)

NOTE: The final exam is on Sat. Dec. 18 at 7 pm. [THIS IS THE CORRECT TIME. IGNORE ALL OTHER NOTICES OF EXAM TIMES. DO NOT LET ANYONE SCHEDULE A CONFLICTING FLIGHT, SINCE IT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE TO SCHEDULE A MAKE UP EXAM.]

- **Research Project**: To be completed in steps … For detailed directions, see the course’s Blackboard (Bb) site. (In the upper left hand corner of the Bb site, click on “Research Project”.)

Overview of the research project:

There are two required submissions (see the Bb site) and two required research papers:

1. **Prediction**: Predict the winner of a congressional election of your choosing (Due Monday, Nov. 1); and
2. **Explanation**: Explain the actual outcome in the same election contest and discuss its implications (Due Monday, Dec. 6)

Things to consider:

1. There is no fool-proof system for predicting an election: that’s one of the reasons why we have them.
2. Figuring out how to predict the outcome is a large part of the assignment.
3. When you choose an election contest …
   a. Competitive elections, where the winner is in doubt, are exciting and can impact control of Congress and, thereby, the Obama presidency.
   b. Non-competitive election contests, over presumptively “safe” seats, are intellectually and methodologically challenging: Why doesn’t something happen?
   c. Senate and House elections are equally challenging: Senate elections tend to be more complicated, although there is more accessible data; the outcome of a House elections may turn on fewer factors, although data is harder to obtain.
   d. There is an advantage to picking a state of congressional district you know well, and you may be able to reach out to locals for research assistance.
4. As you go about your research …

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4 There is no length requirement.
a. You’ll want to make sure you’re in class the day Megan Mitchell presents the online research guide she has developed.

b. You can reach out to Ms. Mitchell and the other Reference Librarians for help: Just send her an email. (You probably can learn to use search engines more efficiently.)

c. You can work in groups; just write your own paper.

d. You should feel free to consult with your Study Group’s Tutor.

e. After you consult with the reference librarians and with your Tutor, feel free to consult with the Instructor.

5. Influences on election outcomes to consider …

a. Midterm elections are different than general elections: Presidents usually do not have great influence, voter turnout is lower and biased, local issues dominate national issues, pocketbook issues dominate cultural issues, etc.

b. Localism biases everything: What’s going on in the state or district is more influential than what’s going on in the nation or the world – unless it’s something catastrophic.

c. Economic conditions shape voters’ choices: What’s the level of unemployment in the state or congressional district? How much stimulus money was spent in the state or congressional district? How many homes were foreclosed? How many banks failed? How many factories closed?

d. Constituency characteristics. Who are these people? What do they care about?

e. Culture. What is the political culture of the state or district?

f. History matters: What has happened in previous elections? In the primaries leading up to this election? How did the President do there in 2008? Has he been back? How did the incumbent win last time? What, if anything, might have upset the status quo?

g. Touch. If a Congressperson falls out of touch with their constituency, no great opponent is required to unseat them. How do you measure “touch”?  

h. Persona. A candidate may seek to establish a direct connection with voters, by creating and projecting, mostly through mass media, a favorable persona. Has any candidate succeeded?

i. Support structures. Candidates are connected to potential voters indirectly, though intermediaries: friends and neighbors, national interest groups that have a strong local presence, grassroots interest groups and associations, social media campaigns, etc. How strong are they?

j. Passion/Anger. Turnout and voter choice can be driven by emotion: which campaign has the most, positive energy?

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5 The National Automobile Dealers Association, for example.
k. Money. It’s spent beyond the point of diminishing returns. (Half of it is wasted, although nobody knows which half.)

l. Gaffes and Black Swans. Candidates sometimes screw up; sometimes it matters, Bizarre events occur, ones that no one anticipated, although, afterwards, everyone says: Of course.” Be on the lookout. Look over the horizon.

m. Oh yeah … the campaigns. What are the relative merits of the (usually) two campaigns? The assets and liabilities of the candidates? The quality and coverage of the ads? The media coverage?

n. Other – only limited by your politically astute insight.

6. Citations. All facts and all quotations, obviously, must be properly cited.

7. Papers must be word processed in dark ink, left justified (i.e., don’t try to make it look like a book; your printer doesn’t do proportional spacing that well), single-sided, with page numbers, and securely fastened (it’s also a good idea to have your name on every page).

8. Helpful hints.

   a. Keep track of where you’ve looked for information. When you hit a wall and go to someone, say a Reference Librarian, for help … anticipate the following conversation: You: “I can’t find any information on …” The Reference Librarian: “Well, where did you look?” At this point, no one can help you if your response is: “The Internet”.

   b. You will find your research goes much better if you share your successes and problems with the members of your Study Group (and your Tutor).

9. Caveats. Save your work often. Make a back up often (ideally in a cloud or on a flash drive). Only don’t save what you are happy to lose.
SYLLABUS

FORMAT OF EVERY WEEK

Week x: Major Topic
Assignments:
[NOTE: Almost every class will include a “NYT ASSIGNMENT”, an in-class, oral analysis of a story from the New York Times or some other case assigned or passed out by the Instructor.]

Specific Topics/Policy cases
Required Reading:
[NOTE: For any class day, you are responsible for all previous (Monday-Friday) issues of the New York Times, except for that day’s issue.]

Recommended Reading: [Optional]

Week 1: The proper role of government
Assignments
• Be prepared to present, in Thursday’s class, your analysis of relevant stories in the NYT for Tuesday, Sept. 7 and Wednesday, Sept. 8.
  o NOTE: In class on Thursday and in every subsequent class, you will be asked for your analysis of one or more stories from previous issues of the New York Times and/or other cases assigned or passed out by the Instructor.
  o TO PREPARE AND PRESENT YOUR ANALYSIS IN CLASS … simply answer the following six questions (and join in the discussion):
    1. What’s the issue? (I.e., that which people disagree about)
    2. Who are the stakeholders? (I.e., those who care about the issue)
    3. What are the stakeholders’ positions? (I.e., what do they want government to do?)
    4. What values are at stake? (What values will be served by governmental involvement? What values will be suppressed?)
    5. What do you think government should do in this case? Why?
    6. So what? I.e., what do your answers to the above questions reveal or suggest about:
       ▪ Politics?
       ▪ Government?
       ▪ Public policy?
       ▪ The policy making process?

Specific Topics/Policy cases
• The significance of midterm elections
• The Preamble to the Constitution
  o Why “We”?
  o Implied questions?
• What can government do?: The Island of Despair
  o The allocation of (scarce and valuable) resources
Resource allocation decisions
Alternative resource allocation mechanisms
Scarcity + Pluralism = ?
Values
Politics

What should government do?
- The case for less government
- The case for more government
- What, if anything, should government do about reducing or eliminating that portion of childhood obesity due to the consumption of high fructose corn syrup?

On Thursday, Sept. 9:
- Questions of the syllabus?
- Continuation of above specific topics
- The NYT ASSIGNMENT (See above)

Required Reading
- Beginning with today’s New York Times (NYT), and continuing with every Monday-Friday issue, read those stories relevant to course concerns.

Recommended Reading
- Paul A. Dawson, American Government: Institutions, Policies, and Politics. Prologue and Chapter 1 [All chapters are available on Electronic Reserve] (Hereafter … Dawson)
- George Orwell, “Politics and the English language” [ERes]

Week 2 (Sept. 14 & 16): The Constitution

RESEARCH PROJECT. Step 2: In class on Tuesday, Sept. 14, turn in a copy of your choice of an election. (Follow the format described above.)

6 ERes = On Electronic Reserve, password = polt105 @ http://eres.cc.oberlin.edu/eres/default.aspx
7 The serious academic exposition of bullshit began with Harry Frankfurt, On Bullshit. “Frankfurt distinguishes between bullshit and outright lying thusly: ‘the essence of bullshit is not that it is false, but that it is phony.’ In other words, the difference lies not in the product, but rather the process. To Frankfurt, then, bullshit is a ‘greater enemy of the truth’ than lying, since it ignores the authority of truthfulness: ‘It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction.’” http://media.www.uwmleader.com/media/storage/paper980/news/2005/10/11/Ae/On.College.Bullshit.And.Love-1987306.shtml
Assignments:

- Sign up for a study group/tutor
- The NYT ASSIGNMENT
- In class discussion questions:
  - In the required reading assignment (below), what is Madison’s argument? NOTE: Be prepared to reconstruct, orally, Madison’s argument in a manner that is correct and complete.
  - What are the political and policy consequences of Madison’s argument

Specific Topics/Policy cases:

- The Founders as problem solvers: What was the problem?
- The Constitution as the solution: Why was it?
- Madison’s insight and remedy, and its consequences

Required Reading:

- NYT
- James Madison, Federalist Papers, Nos. 10 and 51. Available at http://loc.gov/const/fed/fedpapers.html

Recommended Reading: Dawson, Chapter 2

Week 3 (Sept. 21 & 23): Federalism

RESEARCH PROJECT

- Step 3: In class on Tuesday, Sept. 21, learn how to use the Blackboard and Mudd library research sources from Forrest Rose, OCTET Instructional Technologist and Megan Mitchell, Mudd Reference and Instruction Librarian

- Step 6: In class on Thursday, Sept. 23, join in the brainstorming of possible influences on the outcomes of the election.

Assignments: The NYT ASSIGNMENT

Specific Topics/Policy cases:

- Take be to your leader!
- Wild burros: What, if anything, should government do?
- What should be done with the late fees?
- What are the consequences of resource allocation mechanisms in which power is limited and fragment? (PB&J I)
- Is there a “separation of powers” in American government?

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8 To brainstorm, try to envision (i) what might impact an election and (ii) the way in which that impact occurs. For example, you might think that money has an impact. Fine, but then ask yourself, what is it about money that brings about some effect? Is it the number of television ads that money can buy? Or the quality of the campaign consultants that can be hired? Or is it that a huge pile of cash on hand at the beginning of the election season scares out serious competition?
Required Reading: NYT
Recommended Reading:
- Dawson, Chapter 3
- Wills, “What makes a good leader?” [ERes]

Week 4 (Sept. 28 & 30): Civil liberties and civil rights

RESEARCH PROJECT
- Step 7: In class on Tuesday, Sept. 28, turn in 3 (hard copies) of your list of those factors you think will affect the outcome of “your” congressional election.

Assignments:
- The NYT ASSIGNMENT
  - In class discussion: Be prepared to present and defend the items on your list of factors that will affect the outcome of your election.

Specific Topics/Policy cases:
- Would you rather set free a guilty person or lock up and innocent one?
- Should government ban dwarf tossing?

Required Reading: NYT
Recommended Reading: Dawson, Chapter 4

NEXT CLASS: Who will bring a musical instrument?

Week 5 (Oct. 5 & 7): Political culture and public opinion

Assignments: The NYT ASSIGNMENT

Specific Topics/Policy cases:
- What would you tell a Prospie if you wanted to make sure they wouldn’t apply/get in?
- Why don’t you know the words to “Solidarity Forever”?
- Who wants to buy a dollar bill?
- Should college students be permitted to form a belly dancing club?
- Should healthy people be required to buy health insurance?

Required Reading: NYT
Recommended Reading:
- Dawson, Chapter 5
- Selection from Wills, Nixon Agonistes [ERes]

Week 6 (Oct. 12 & 14): Political Parties and Interest Groups

Assignments: The NYT ASSIGNMENT
Specific Topics/Policy cases:
- The First Amendment
The difference between political interest groups and political parties
Why do the environmentally conscious litter?
The stag and the hare
Will you join me in a campaign to get the federal government to develop a program to stop “Killer Asteroids” before they extinguish all life on Earth?
Why are Burger King and McDonald's side by side?: A spatial model of party competition
Real differences between Democrats and Republicans!

**Required Reading: NYT**

**Recommended Reading:**
- Mallon, “Asteroids are coming” [ERes]
- Dawson, Chapter 6
- Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons” @ [http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/162/3859/1243](http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/162/3859/1243)
- Mayer, “Covert Operations: The billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama.” @ [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa_fact_mayer](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa_fact_mayer)

**Week 7 (Oct. 19 & 21): Media and Elections**

**Assignments:** The NYT ASSIGNMENT

**Specific Topics/Policy cases:**
- Electioneering vs. governing
- The permanent campaign
- Running alone
- Localism
- What’s wrong with election campaigns?
- Candy bar campaigns
- The Pogo problem

**Required Reading: NYT**

**Recommended Reading:**
- Dawson, Chapter 7
- Abramowitz, “The myth of the independent voter revisited” @ [http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/aia2009082001/](http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/aia2009082001/)
- Murrow speech @ [http://www.turnoffyourtv.com/commentary/hiddenagenda/murrow.html](http://www.turnoffyourtv.com/commentary/hiddenagenda/murrow.html)
- Parkin, “Taking late night comedy seriously: How candidate appearances on late night television can engage viewers” @ [http://prq.sagepub.com/content/early/2009/01/06/1065912908327604.full.pdf+html](http://prq.sagepub.com/content/early/2009/01/06/1065912908327604.full.pdf+html)

**MIDTERM EXAM: Thursday, Oct. 21**

**FALL BREAK**
Weeks 8 and 9 (Weeks of Nov. 1 and 8): Election Predictions

RESEARCH PROJECT. Step 9: PREDICTION (hard copy) PAPER DUE: Monday, Nov. 1, outside Rice 230, no later than 6 pm.

Assignments:
- The NYT ASSIGNMENT
- Be prepared to present and defend your predictions

Specific Topics:
- Predictions
- Postmortem of election predictions

Required Reading: NYT
Recommended Reading: Read the Blackboard postings of others
Recommended Activity: Start your Explanation paper.

Tuesday, Nov. 2. ELECTION PARTY: Dawson’s, 8 pm – midnight, BRING YOUR OWN AGE-APPROPRIATE BEVERAGE, 284 Forest Street
http://www.mapquest.com/maps?city=Oberlin&state=OH&address=284+Forest+

Week 10 (Nov. 9 & 11): Governmental institutions and the policy making process

Assignments: The NYT ASSIGNMENT
Specific Topics/Policy cases:
- The Long Island Sound problem
- Postmortem of the Long Island Sound problem
- Serial vs. iterative policy cycles
- PB&J II
- Pogo problem revisited

Required Reading: NYT
Recommended Reading:
- Dawson, Chapter 9-14
- Packer, “The empty chamber” @ http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/09/100809fa_fact_packer
- Jay and Lynn, “Yes Minister” @ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yes_Minister

Recommended Activity: How’s your Explanation paper going? Need help? (See your tutor, Ms. Mitchell, the Instructor.)


Assignments: The NYT ASSIGNMENT
Specific Topics/Policy cases:
- Lyndon Johnson and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957
Required Reading: NYT
Recommended Activity: Work on your Explanation paper, due Dec. 6.

THANKSGIVING (No class on Thursday, Nov. 25)

Weeks 13 and 14 (Monday, Dec. 6, Dec. 7, 9, and 14): Explanations of congressional election results

RESEARCH PROJECT. Step 13: EXPLANATION (hard copy) PAPER DUE: Monday, Dec. 6, outside Rice 230, no later than 6 pm.

Assignments:
- The NYT ASSIGNMENT
- Beginning with class on Tuesday Dec. 7 (and continuing next week), be prepared to present and defend your explanation, analysis, and interpretations.

Specific Topics:
- Election outcomes
- The likely impact of the 2010 congressional elections

Required Reading: NYT
Recommended Reading: The explanation papers of others

FINAL EXAM: Sat. Dec. 18 at 7 pm. [THIS IS THE CORRECT TIME. IGNORE ALL OTHER NOTICES OF EXAM TIMES. DO NOT LET ANYONE SCHEDULE A CONFLICTING FLIGHT, SINCE IT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE TO SCHEDULE A MAKE UP EXAM.]