POLS 2305: AMERICAN POLITICS

Course Description: THE PEOPLE OF TEXAS, speaking through their State Constitution, have determined that all citizens, in order to properly perform the duties of citizenship, need to be familiar with the Constitution of the United States and those of the several states. To fulfill this need, Texas Law requires that six semester hours dedicated to that purpose be completed by all students attending institutions of higher learning receiving state funds. Here at Angelo State University, this requirement is met by taking POLS 2305 and 2306.

The United States Constitution is the central legitimating symbol of American political life. American citizens therefore need to understand how it frames political controversy and how it influences political and social change. To that end, we will study important debates concerning American democracy and the meaning of liberty and equality from the Founding until the present day. We will examine the important function of citizenship in democracy and of federalism in American democracy.

Course Objectives:

At the end of the course students will

- Understand the core principles of American democracy and how they have guided the American people and their leaders throughout the nation’s history.
- Learn the purposes and benefits of having a written constitution, and of the special constitutional design crafted by the Founding Fathers.
- Understand the duties and rights associated with American citizenship.

Texts:

2. Additional readings linked on Blackboard in the Lessons.

Course Requirements:

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Extra Credit: Movie Blog (see Blackboard)

Important Dates

Lesson periods: Lessons open each Monday at 12am and close the following Monday at 12am, according to the following schedule:

- Lesson 1 = Week 1 (8/27-9/3)
- Lesson 2 = Week 2 (9/3-9/10)
- Lesson 3 = Week 3 (9/10-9/17)
Lesson 4 = Week 4 (9/17-9/24)
Lesson 5 = Week 5 (9/24-10/1)
Lesson 6 = Week 6 (10/1-10/8)
Lesson 7 = Week 7 (10/8-10/15)
Final Exam Period = 10/15-10/18

Discussion Threads: Initial robust responses due every Thursday; follow-up responses due at the close of the Lesson (each Monday at 12am)
Tests: Each Lesson has a test, which is due on that Thursday by the end of the day.
Final Essay Exam: Due by the end of the day Thursday, 10/18
Extra Credit: Must be posted by the end of Week 7 (10/15 at 12 am)

Course Organization

Lesson One – Freedom, Democracy, and the Constitution

The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are the twin pillars of the American political order and represent the inauguration of liberal democracy. In this lesson, students will study the basic moral and political principles proclaimed in the Declaration and consider the continuing influence of these “self-evident truths” both in America and across the world. Students will examine the relationship of the Declaration and the Constitution and carefully study the means by which the Founding Fathers thought the Constitution would make our democracy decent, stable, and secure.

Lesson Two – Federalism, Citizenship, and Civic Culture

Federalism is the part of our constitutional design that recognizes the variety of habits, interests, and values that exist in the United States, while also recognizing that in certain important way and for certain important purposes Americans are one people. Students will consider the importance of civic culture for producing citizens, of an engaged citizenry for maintaining constitutional democracy, and of local government for cultivating both.

Lesson Three – Public Opinion and Political Participation, Political Parties, and Elections

Students will examine the sources and effects of public opinion in democratic politics, the activation of that opinion through various forms of participation in the realm of politics. Students will examine the alignment of political interests and opinions into organized parties, and the struggle for victory of one’s opinions, interests, or party through political campaigns and elections.

Lesson Four – Mass Media and Congress

This lesson looks at the importance of a "free press" in a democratic or republican polity. Since the transmission of ideas and information is no longer confined to print, it will also look at how the development and use of new media influences the kind of politics practiced in America.

In a republican form a government, as the Founders understood it, the legislative branch
“necessarily predominates.” That makes Congress something like primus inter pares (first among equals) in our government. This lesson looks at the purposes of this branch, its construction, and how historical development and constitutional change has produced the body as it operates today. We will also discuss the Texas legislature and its biennial sessions.

Lesson Five – The Presidency, the Bureaucracy, and the Judiciary

The Founders constructed the office of the Presidency to be an "energetic" executive, strong enough ensure the stable administration and execution of the laws but "safe" enough so that he will not turn the office into a monarchy or a dictatorship. This lesson surveys the occupants of this office who have had the most lasting influence on the office, and it studies the evolution of the office over time.

As the administrative apparatus of government became more and more complicated over time, it took on a quasi-legislative role in prescribing rules and regulations that would bind with the force of law even though its authors belonged to the executive and not the legislative authority. This lesson studies the operations of these agencies and the difficulties and controversies regarding their place in the American constitutional order.

The Supreme Court of the United States is the head of the judicial branch of government. Like all courts this branch is responsible for applying the law. Unique at the time of the nation's founding, however, was the fact that American courts had the power to set aside congressional statutes that were contrary to the Constitution. This lesson surveys the major constitutional decisions of the Supreme Court, their impact on politics and social life, and the controversies surrounding them.

Lesson Six – Economic Policy, Social Policy, and Foreign Policy and National Security

As the nation became more populous, the population more urban, and the economy more interconnected, people began to expect that the government take a more active role in ensuring economic security and fostering the general welfare--first through state and local governments but increasingly through the national government. This lesson will track the progression of these developments to the current day and discuss current controversies over the extent and effectiveness of the welfare state.

The first and most necessary business of government is to protect its citizens from external threats and to maintain cordial relations with friendly nations. This function is served exclusively through the national government and performed primarily by the executive branch. This lesson will study look the evolving challenges as well as the perennial problems that face our nation in these areas.

Lesson Seven – Civil Liberties and Civil Rights

Students will follow the history of the American struggle to define the principles of liberty and equality and consider especially the expanding role that the Supreme Court came to play in it. The focus of this lesson is relationship of the individual and the state in the American political order—and the boundaries on government power spelled out by the courts. Picking up where the last lesson left off, students will explore the struggle to define and apply the principle
of equality in American life, with special attention paid to the role of the Supreme Court.

**ASU Student Learning Objectives**

**Critical Thinking Skills (CT)**

CT1. Gather, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information relevant to a question or issue.

CT2. Develop and demonstrate a logical position (i.e. perspective, thesis, hypothesis) that acknowledges ambiguities or contradictions.

**Communication Skills (CS)**

CS1. Develop, interpret, and express ideas through effective written communication.

CS2. Develop, interpret, and express ideas through effective oral communication.

**Social Responsibility (SR)**

SR1. Demonstrate intercultural competence.

SR2. Demonstrate knowledge of civic responsibility.

SR3. Demonstrate the ability to engage effectively in the campus, regional, national or global communities.

**Personal Responsibility (PR)**

PR1. Demonstrate the ability to evaluate choices, actions and consequences as related to ethical decision-making.