

## **POLS 1336: Introduction to American and Texas Politics**

### **Prof. Murray: Spring 2006**

This class is the first half of the required American and Texas politics course. It focuses on the “inputs” side of politics and government – what individuals and groups can do to influence or affect the political process, and how they are themselves impacted by political decisions. Most of our work will deal with American politics, with perhaps 20% or so devoted to Texas state matters. It should be noted, however, that this course does satisfy the state degree requirement for studying the Texas Constitution.

This is not a course in current events, but it is grounded in the context of American and Texas politics. Nationally, President Bush struggles to regain his footing after enduring a very difficult year since his reelection in November 2004. Despite a relatively healthy economy by many measures (unemployment, growth in gross domestic product), Mr. Bush enters 2006 with his job approval ratings in the low 40 percent range, and faces continuing challenges in Iraq and a half dozen other “hot spots” across the globe, large trade and fiscal deficits, the expensive and hardly begun rebuilding along the Gulf Coast after a series of powerful hurricanes, and long-term issues in the health care and entitlement areas. And while his party controls both houses of Congress, his congressional allies are threatened by an emerging scandal involving powerful lobbyists and key legislative members. Midterm elections loom in just a few months, and both major parties are girding for another hard-fought contest.

Here in Texas, our legislature will reconvene this spring in a continuing effort to address the very difficult and expensive issue of funding public schools in the wake of the Texas Supreme Court decision that threw out the existing system with its very great reliance in local property taxes. Governor Perry has launched a bid to become the state’s longest serving chief executive, but he faces three very different challengers in the November 2006 general election, including a sharp-tongued satirist who bills himself as the “Kinkster,” and a sitting Comptroller with the political handle “One Tough Grandma,” and a yet-to-be-named Democratic nominee.

We open the class by looking at some big questions: What is politics? Why did it develop and why has it persisted for thousands of years? What have been the predominate forms of political organization over time? Why has political *democracy*, the theory of government and politics that underlies the American system of governance, been widely adopted across the planet over the last half century? And yet, we must note, many countries have resisted or tried and rejected this democratic model, and we are presently engaged in a great contest in Iraq, to see if American military power can transform a military dictatorship into a democratic state in a very short period of time. Obviously, the jury is out on that, but we will monitor developments on that front closely over the coming months.

To better understand the democratic theory of governance, we will examine some of the leading alternatives that have been tried over the several thousand years of recorded history. These will include *anarchist, theocratic, monarchical, fascist, and communist systems* of governance.

Next, we look at the historical evolution of the American political system; starting from the early settlement of this land by Eurasian peoples thousands of years ago, the European colonization in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the emergence of the English colonies along the Atlantic Coast in the 1600s and 1700s that would form the basis of the new United States. We stress the importance of political developments in England in this period, and their transference and

transformation in their growing American colonies that set the stage for the American Revolution and the establishment of the United States in the mid 1770s. We will look closely at the formulation of the American Constitution in the 1780s, and its evolution over two centuries as the fundamental basis of our political system.

One important aspect of that evolution has been in the area of *federalism*, which deals with the complex relations between the national government and the governments of the original 13 and now 50 states. In this section we will review the single greatest failure of the American political system – the inability of that system to deal with the slavery issue and the related secession crisis that was only settled after a brutal civil war that killed more Americans (about 600,000 in a nation of 30 million) than all other wars we have engaged in throughout our history.

Next, we look at the contemporary United States – its basic constitutional structure, the makeup of its population, and the dominant issues facing the nation at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We will then shift our focus to the state of Texas. How did this part of North America get settled? What led to the formation of the Republic of Texas and its incorporation in the United States? What are its constitutional patterns? What are the issues facing the state compared to the nation? Why has Texas become such an important state in national politics (three of the last 8 U.S. presidents have been from Texas).

Returning to the national scene, we will next look at the role public opinion plays in our political system, and look closely at the media that cover and help shape our politics. Next, we will turn to political parties, and their role in campaigns and elections, then the role of political interest groups in the American and Texas systems. We will use the 2004 election campaigns for the presidency and control of Congress and state government, to illustrate the points covered in the readings. We will try to show how the 2004 elections feed into the policy debates we are having in 2005 on such issues as social security, the war in Iraq, reforming the national and state tax systems, and prohibiting gay marriages.

Finally, we will try to sum up the general patterns we have been discussing, and close by talking about the future of American and Texas politics.

The course blends lectures by Prof. Murray with readings from a basic American government text, **The People and American Government, Second Edition**, compiled by Gregory Weiher. Two other short paperbacks are also required.

These are:                   **Divided States of America: The Slash and Burn Politics of the 2004 Presidential Election**, by Larry J. Sabato (Pearson/Longman, 2006)

                                  And **Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized American**, by Morris P. Fiorina (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Pearson/Longman, 2006)

Because much of what you will be tested on is not covered in the texts, **it is extremely important that you attend class and take careful notes, as the exams will include questions from both the lectures and the readings.**

The order of readings and exams is as follows:

I.       General Introduction to Politics. No assigned readings.

- II. The establishment of the American political system and the U.S. Constitution. Read Chapters 1, and 2, and 8 in the Weiher book, as well as the Declaration of Independence, The Constitution of the United States, and Federalist No. 10, which are at the back of the Tedin textbook.
- III. The Evolution of the American constitutional system: Fundamental American Liberties and the Struggle for Equal Rights. Read Chapter 16 in the Weiher text.
- IV. The American Federal System. Read Chapters 3 in the Weiher text.
- V. The American Political Culture. Read Chapter 4 in Weiher and the prefaces and the first 4 chapter in the Fiorina book.

**First Regular Exam: About February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2006.**

- VI. Where Does Texas fit into this mix? Read Chapters 12 and 13 in Weiher text.
- VII. Public Opinion and the Media. Chapters 5, 9, 17, 19 and 20 in the Weiher text.
- VIII. Individual Participation and Elections in the United States. Read chapters 6, 10, and 11 in Weiher..

**Second Regular Exam: About March 30, 2006.**

- IX. Political Parties and Interest Groups in American and Texas Politics. Read Chapters 7, 8, and 14 in the Weiher text.
- VIII. The 2004 Presidential and Congressional Elections: Are We a Red and Blue Nation, or One United States? Read the rest of the Fiorina book and the Sabato books, as well Chapters 15 in the Weiher text.
- IX. Elections and Politics in Houston, Texas. Read chapter 18 in the Weiher text.

**Third Regular Exam: About April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006.**

- X. Looking Ahead – the Future of American Politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. No assigned readings.

**Final Exam: Thursday, May 11<sup>th</sup>, 8-11AM. (As scheduled by the University)**

**Other Important dates to keep in mind:**

**February 14, 2006:** Last day to drop a course or withdraw without receiving a grade.

**April 4, 2006:** Last day to drop a course or withdraw.

## Other Important Information for the Course

**Course Grades:** Grading in this class is on a **curve**, which means **your relative standing in the class determines your grade**. The top 10-12% get As and A-s; about 20-22% get B+, B, or B-s; 40% fall in the C range, 15% in the D category, and the bottom 10% fail.

Grades are based largely on the scheduled exams – they count 450 out of a total of 650 possible points. The three regular tests count 100 points each, and the final exam counts 150 points.

There will also be **three pop quizzes** made up of questions from recent lectures. Each pop quiz counts 25 points, (10 multiple choice questions) but I'll drop your lowest score so combined they count for 50 points.

The three regular exams require answering 20 multiple choice questions, and then either writing an essay on a general topic, or completing another 20 multiple choice items – the choice is yours. The final consists of 60 multiple choice questions, including 12 items repeated from the three regular tests and the pop quizzes. There is no essay option on the final exam.

**Exam makeup policy.** If you have to miss an exam, one makeup will be given approximately one week after the scheduled test. All makeups will consist of a series of short essays with some choice. *No makeups are given for missed pop quizzes, but if you miss one of these, it will be counted as your dropped score.*

There is also a **required outside essay** that counts 150 points (plus 15 bonus points if submitted by Tuesday, April 5<sup>th</sup> 2005). This essay assignment requires you to write a minimum 3,000-word essay – that is 10-12 pages, double spaced in a 12 font - discussing your own political socialization and development. The specific requirements for the essay are detailed on following pages. I would encourage you to start thinking about this assignment and making notes, BUT, DO NOT BEGIN THIS PROJECT UNTIL WE HAVE DISCUSSED POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION IN CLASS.

## Attendance Policy

**Attendance will be taken and more than two unexcused absences will cost you two points per missed class.** Experience has shown class absences are the largest single factor in explaining low grades, which is hardly surprising given the number of exam questions that come from the lectures. So make every effort to get to class – you paid for this course, so get the value of your investment. If you do miss try to get the lecture notes from another member.

Students will be assigned to different sections of the classroom based on the first letters of last names. If your last name begins with the letters **A – F** you should take a seat on the **Left Side** of the classroom as you enter. If your last name begins with the letters **G – Q** take a seat in the **Center** of the classroom. If your last name begins with the letters **R – Z**, take a seat on the **Right Side** as you enter the classroom. A roll for your section will be passed from back to front – sign in and pass it along. If you arrive in class after the roll has passed by, you can sign a tardy roll at the front when class is dismissed and only lose one point for the class in question.

## Drop Policy

It is *your responsibility* to drop this class if you so decide. If you stop attending, I will not automatically drop you. And remember, the last day to drop the class or withdraw **without receiving a grade is Tuesday, February 14th**. The last day to drop with a grade is **Tuesday, April 4, 2006**.

## General Considerations

In a large class such as this one, it is very important that each student show respect and consideration for others. I encourage students to speak out and take part in class discussions and will ask for questions at the beginning of each class. I also encourage you to raise questions or make comments by raising one's hand and being recognized during lectures. However, private conversations in class are not permitted, nor is reading newspapers, sleeping, or disturbing other members in other ways.

Unfortunately, in a very large class, several students will encounter difficulties, often due to unforeseen events like illness in one's family. If you are experiencing problems in the course, **please speak with me as soon as possible**. I am reasonably sympathetic to your problems, if you address them in a timely fashion. However, I am not well disposed to student complaints at the end of the semester when there is little or no time to make adjustments or take corrective action.

## How to get in touch with me.

My office is in **404 PGH (Philip G. Hoffman)**. My office phone is **(713) 743-3909**. Office e-mail is [rmurray@UH.edu](mailto:rmurray@UH.edu). **Note the email includes my first initial – there are several Murrays at UH.**

Office hours for the spring I semester are **10-11:30TTH**, and **1:30-2:30W**. I am on campus most days, so schedule another time if these hours do not work. We will likely put information about the class on the web, so you can easily access it, but those arrangements have not yet been made

One graduate assistant will be working with me this semester. His name is Scott Mason. His email address is [smason@uh.edu](mailto:smason@uh.edu).

## **Autobiographical Assignment: Prof. Murray/Spring 2006**

You are required to write a paper for this class. The subject is yourself, or more specifically, your political socialization and its consequences. By socialization I mean the experiences that have shaped your unique values and attitudes about society, toward the political system in which we live. In class we stress that while we are hard-wired by our genes toward certain basic predispositions that are politically relevant (a desire for social relations, varying degrees of empathy toward others, a sense of justice) people *acquire* specific social and political opinions – we are not born with genes that incline us to like or dislike Democrats, George W. Bush, gay marriage, etc.. Socialization refers to the *environmental influences* that have shaped who we are, and extends to all aspects of our lives (think of why are there so many Astro and Rocket fans in Houston, and why do Catholic parents raise so few Baptist children?). In this class but we are not interested in why most local residents like or dislike the NFL team, but rather the what and why of your basic political values and beliefs. In sum, this paper should address two basic questions: (1) What are your basic political values, beliefs, and opinions? And, (2) how did you acquire these?

Before you begin to answer these questions, review Chapters 4, 5, 6, 17, and 20 in the Weiher text. Also, follow the class discussions of political socialization closely. I would suggest discussing the paper with others, including family members, friends, and others that have been influential in your life. Keep in mind there are no right or wrong answers in a project like this. Good papers instead require that you be candid and insightful about yourself – who am I, and how did I come to be this way? And, that you take the time to write up the results of your reflections in a careful, organized fashion.

Students tend to approach this assignment in two ways. Some adopt a *chronological* approach. They start by discussing when and where they were born, and trace their lives forward in an arc to the present. Others follow a more *topical* approach. They start out describing their present values and opinions about society and politics, and then discuss how they arrived at these positions. While you are not limited to these approaches, good papers address the following areas:

- Family influences. What has been the impact of your family and others who cared for you on your attitudes and opinions? Did you grow up in a political household? Was politics discussed at the dinner table? Did you know from an early age, which political party or faction your family favored, if any? Did people you were/are close to admire any political figures? Who and what did they dislike about politics? How, if at all, has your family changed their political views over time?

- Neighborhood or community effects. Where did you grow up? What was distinctive about the area or areas? It makes a big difference if your socialization occurred in a refugee camp in Thailand, or a small town in East Texas, or in Southwest Houston, or the Third Ward across Scott Street from UH.
- Educational and peer group influences. What schools have you attended? What teachers have had an impact on your values and opinions? What peer groups at school or outside school have you associated with over the years?
- Significant events or experiences in your life. Bad and good things happen to people, with lasting results. What painful and enjoyable experiences have had the most impact on you? (Generally, negative or painful experiences have more impact on political and social views than positive and pleasant things) What did you take away from these experiences?
- Other influences you feel have been important in shaping who you are. These could include your church, or religious background; the racial or ethnic group you identify with; your expectations about the future, and so forth.

After a rather thorough inventory of the factors that have influenced your opinions you need to detail your present social and political values. (*Warning: students are generally better at discussing the influences than describing current attitudes*) Make sure you address the following in this section:

- Describe yourself politically. Are you a Democrat/Republican/Independent, or do these labels really not apply to you? Would you say you were a Liberal, Moderate, or Conservative when it comes to politics? Are you active in any political group or associations?
- What political issues most interest you? The war in Iraq? A strong economy? Combating terrorism? Abortion? Gun control? Education? Restoring moral values to America? Equal rights for women, gays? Racism or reverse discrimination? Preserving the environment? Saving social security? Or something else?
- Which politicians do you most admire? Which ones do you like the least? Why?
- And describe at least one area where your views have changed over time, and what caused you to rethink your position.

The paper should be at least 3,000 words in length. Longer papers are fine. To receive early credit of 15 points, the paper must be turned in before **5PM on April \_\_\_\_**. **Papers cannot be emailed to me – give me or Mr. Mason a hard copy and keep an additional hard copy for your records.** Early papers will be returned the last class day – \_\_\_\_.

**All papers not turned in for early credit are due on \_\_\_\_.** Late papers lose 2 points per day/.

Because these papers contain necessarily contain personal information, they will be treated confidentially. I will personally read all papers and return them to you.

Finally, grades tend to be fairly good on this project, in contrast to the exam scores. So take care to do a good job on this assignment. Since your final grade is based on a class curve, you need to produce a better paper than most of your classmates to move up to a better overall grade in the course.

Enjoy the course.