

*

American Government
101 fall 2007
University of Southern Mississippi

Bob Press, PhD
Political Science Department
416 Liberal Arts Building
266-4311 (direct); 266-4310
press.bob@gmail.com and by appointment

Tues/Thurs. 11:00-12:15
International Center 101
Office hours:
Mon. 11-12; 2-4

I Introduction

A bridge collapses in Minneapolis and 11 people are killed. A coalmine collapses and six men are killed, then three more are killed trying to rescue them. Almost every day Americans and Iraqis are killed in a war once popular but now very unpopular. And everyday, well-paid lobbyists are walking the halls of Congress to get their clients' wishes put into legislation.

Are you in favor of abortion or not? Where do you stand on gay marriage? Should women be allowed to assume full combat roles in the U.S. forces? Why was the government so slow helping people after Katrina?

How many times a day do you check Facebook? How many times a day do you check national or international news? When you do tune into the news, is your source biased to the left or right, or not much at all?

Have you ever been in a 'democratic' classroom?

Government is far from a dull topic. In this class you will have the opportunity to learn more about how it shapes our lives, what some of the struggles for democracy have been in the past and currently. You will have some choices; and you will be challenged.

Sitting by and complaining to your friends about our government, about the quality of our lives, accomplishes little. But, you might ask, can you help shape American policies that will affect your life? Does the federal government represent you or just the wealthy few? Does our federal government have too much power over our lives or not enough? Has the war on terrorism strengthened our country by making it safer or weakened it by reducing our civil rights? How do we know if our elected leaders are telling the truth? Should we care?

Democracy in the United States has never been a finished product; it is an on-going struggle, a work in progress.

Learning to be an active and informed citizen involves much more than voting. It means understanding something of the past, what our country and its people have gone through to get where we are now. The two authors of the text we will be using challenge readers to learn more than just what happened and when; they offer a very practical guide to critical thinking. Events are analyzed to see what facts about society, what political pressures and government action made something happen.

Democracy is based on both agreements and disagreements. In the federal, state, and local governments, after debates, votes are taken and people move on. Have you ever had a serious disagreement with someone on an issue of values? Did you end up friends or not speaking, or speaking but avoiding the topic? In class you will have a chance to air your views, defend them, criticize the views of others – but not on the basis of mere emotion. Rather, you will learn enough facts and concepts

about government to allow you to engage in discussions and debates based on knowledge not just feelings or preconceived notions.

The objectives of the course are to help you better understand the nature of democracy, including how public issues are debated and compromises sought; to better understand how our federal government makes decisions and why, to appreciate the various societal factors and pressures that help shape federal decisions. Another objective is to become a more informed citizen on local issues and needs and more aware of how those issues and needs of citizens are being addressed – and whether they should be addressed by the local, state or federal government or some combination of these.

To help you reach these objectives, the course offers lectures, discussions, opportunities for you to participate in debates on democratic issues and to role play the tasks key political players carry out in our federal system, including elected officials, the judiciary, interest groups and the media. Our discussions will include historical background, political theory, comparisons with other countries' political systems, and comments on current events. You also learn to clarify, express, and defend your own views on some historic and public issues and to assess your views and opposing views on the basis of political understanding. Students will have some democratic choices in the class on some topics of discussion and in election of class officers who will help lead some discussions and projects.

You will also attend a city hall or similar government meeting. And to become more informed local citizens, the course requires you to complete ten hours of community service at some USM-recognized service agency. At the completion of this service, you will be asked to write a short policy paper assessing any potential or actual role of government in meeting the need the agency is attempting to address. The object of this unpaid service is to learn first-hand more about community issues and needs and the role of government in a democracy. This is also a plus for your resume and may even help in career choice or advancement. (Please see details below).

II Text:

Required text: *The Struggle for Democracy* (Sixth or Seventh Edition 2003) by Edward S. Greenberg and Benjamin I. Page (New York: Longman). A copy of this textbook is also on reserve at the library.

Any additional required materials will be announced in class. Any feature films closely related to aspects of our federal government that may be required to view outside of class will be announced.

Outside research material will be needed to help prepare for some class projects and reports. You will also find it useful to subscribe to or read a national daily newspaper such as the *New York Times*, which is also available on-line. Such a subscription, however, is not required.

III Class policies

Attendance. This is an easy way to win points. Participation points are awarded at random to those in attendance that day. 😊

Miss a class? That's not an excuse for showing up without your assignment in the next class. If you have doubts on what to do, call one of your classmates.

University policies on attendance, final examinations, grades, honesty, and plagiarism (passing someone else's work or ideas off as your own without proper attribution) apply in this course. Everyone must do their own work with no help from others on all assignments.

“When cheating is discovered, the faculty member may give the student an F on the work involved or in the course. If further disciplinary action is deemed appropriate, the

student should be reported to the Dean of Students. In addition to being a violation of academic honesty, cheating violates the Code of Student Conduct and may be grounds for probation, suspension, and/or expulsion.”

Students on disciplinary suspension may not enroll in any courses offered by The University of Southern Mississippi.” (USM Bulletin).

Your Professor reserves the right to adjust this syllabus to meet the needs of the class.

Late assignments. Any assignment turned in late is subject to a grade reduction. ☹ An A paper becomes a B if late up to one week and a C if a week or more late. In other words, an end-of-semester flurry of papers is not acceptable. You must keep up with the readings and the related written assignments. **No papers will be accepted after Nov. 27.** No exam make-ups will be allowed without documented excuses for the entire exam period; any make-ups will differ from the regular exams.

Papers must be typed and handed in, not e-mailed.

If you cannot be physically present (excused or not) when an assignment is due and want to receive credit, you may email a copy to press.bob@gmail.com – but only in Microsoft word, not Word, etc. Then print a copy of the email that shows the date sent; attach this to a printed copy of your assignment and turn them in. Email submissions are not graded; only paper versions handed in are graded.

Writing help. Students who feel uncertain about the quality of their writing are encouraged (and may be required by the professor) to first pass their papers through the USM writing center for assistance in time to meet class deadlines.

Reading tips: (1) skim the chapters for main points; (2) learn key terms; (3) understand the themes and the arguments made by the authors, though you don’t have to agree with them. Do not try to memorize great amounts of text. Learn to think about the material, to analyze it.

Democratization of the classroom. To some extent, you will have the opportunity to work with your professor to establish some replicas of democracy in the classroom as a learning experience.

Disabilities. Any student with any kind of a documented handicap should make this known to the instructor at the start of class for appropriate assistance.

American with Disabilities Act (ADA): If a student has a disability that qualifies under the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) and requires accommodations, he/she should contact the Office for Disability Accommodations (ODA) for information on appropriate policies and procedures. Disabilities covered by ADA may include learning, psychiatric, physical disabilities, or chronic health disorders. Students can contact ODA if they are not certain whether a medical condition/disability qualifies. Mailing address: 118 College Drive #8586, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001; Telephone (601) 266-5024; TTY: (601) 266-6837; Fax: (601) 266-6035.

If you have any questions on content, requirements, grades, policies or other class-related points, please ask me in class or in the office.

IV Grades

Brief readings papers 15%

Quizzes 5%

Service Learning

Service hours 15%

Reports (total) 15%

Final policy paper 15%

Mid term exam 15%

Final exam 15%

Participation

10% *includes credit for showing voter registration card

V Requirements:

1. Readings. The chapter assigned for any particular week should be read by Tuesday of that week. Come to class prepared to discuss the topic. Time permitting; I will try to give a preview of the topic the previous class.

2. Mid-term and final exams will be a combination of multiple choice and short essays. Quizzes will be given to encourage students to keep up with the readings.

3. Brief papers (usually 2 pages) on topics related to readings. Some are scheduled; others may be added as the professor determines are needed for the learning of the class.

4. Voter Registration card. Citizen participation is important. It's up to you whether you want to vote or not; but you get credit in this class for showing your registration card.

5. Attend one City Council, County Council, Planning Commission meeting or court session (in Hattiesburg or elsewhere). Take notes. Write a 2 -page (double-spaced) paper on what you saw and learned about democracy in action. Include (a) highlights of the issues discussed; (b) your impression of how this relates to our class focus of democracy; (c) your own reactions to the experience. The paper, which is worth THREE brief papers, must be turned in on or before Oct. 23.

6. Service Learning: “Kick out the Walls” - Linking the classroom to the real world (Jeffrey Brown, USM Community Service Teaching Assistant designed this section)

Our government exerts influence on all aspects of our society. Some of these influences are obvious, others are more difficult to discern. In an effort to help you more easily identify government influence and to learn how you, yourself, can impact the world around you, each student is required to participate in ten hours of community service throughout the semester.

This also gives you a better appreciation of the needs of our local society and how you may be able to help meet those needs. The Hattiesburg area offers many opportunities for you to volunteer your time. Think about how you could best serve the community. Consider these scenarios:

- Volunteer at a local nursing home. While there, consider the influences of government on Social Security, Medicare, and care regulations. How do these policies impact the residents? What policy changes would help our senior citizens?
- Spend time tutoring local school children after school. What legislation supports this tutoring program? Has the school district faced funding problems since starting the program? What are the needs of the district and children?
- **Service Learning Assignments (plus final paper below)**

Each student should serve at least **ten hours**. Your hours should be divided into at least **four sessions**. Students should also keep up with a report of your visits and you should submit it on these dates. Typed assignments are due:

- September 18 (2 hours completed) 2 pages.
- October 16 (4 hours completed) 2 pages.
- October 30 (7 hours completed) 2 pages.
- November 6 (10 hours completed) 2 pages.

Journals. Keep a journal with you when you go to your service location; take some notes during the visit, or immediately afterwards before returning to campus. This becomes the basis for the papers above and for your final policy paper. Then type up your reports and hand them in.

Each of the four reports should be 2 full pages; double-spaced, 12 point/ Times New Roman font, and should include:

(1 page) **Reflection** on your community service activity. What was your personal reaction to what you saw and did; tell what you observed, and learned. What issues do you see that need further public attention. What is going wrong; what is going right?

(1 page) **Linking service to classroom:** Link topics covered in class/text/discussions to your service experience, explaining how key classroom-discussed concepts can affect the group you are working with. For example:

- When studying Congress, you can research legislation dealing with your group and discuss how it will affect them.
- When studying the media, you can discuss a newspaper article that shows how the media portrays the group (or similar groups/programs) and discuss the implications.

Types of opportunities for service

Here is a sampling of ideas to begin with. Feel free to suggest other options.

Election/Campaign

Tutoring

Library work

Nursing Home

Mentoring

Hospital

Animal Shelter

Habitat for Humanity

VI. Final Service Learning/Policy Paper (3 pages): Due 15 November

Upon completion of the ten hours of community service, write a three-page (double-spaced) policy paper, graded according to the following criteria:

(a) ½ page only: description of what service the agency (or government office) offers and what you did.

(b) 2 pages: examine the social issue involved in the agency you are working for and write about it primarily as a local issue. What is Hattiesburg doing right; or wrong, in terms of support for this issue? Feel free to criticize what you see in terms of meeting social needs locally. If all is going well, you can say, so, but be specific. Also, look at this as a state or national issue. For example, in the case of homelessness, how big a problem is this nationally; what are its causes; what is government at the national, state or local level doing about it, if anything; what should they do? Use some statistics and cite references for your information.

I expect at least five solid references (such as books, journals, newspaper articles; not Wikipedia) The reference should give the name of the work, page number, full name of author, date of publication; location of publisher.

For example, if you are working in an after school program for children, what is the criteria for admission to that program; what social issues are being addressed; on the state or national level, how big a problem is this issue and what is government doing to help address this issue?

If you are working in a public office (city hall, etc), what issues does that office address; how successful is the city in addressing that issue; discuss this issue on a state or national level.

The idea is to **reflect** on your community service experience and relate it to the focus of this course, which is American government.

(c) ½ page: conclusions and personal reflections/observations. Be specific and give examples.

VII. Schedule of Assignments

Thurs Aug 23	Introduction; explanation of course objectives and syllabus Read chapter 1 <u>by Tuesday Aug. 28 and each week's chapter by Tuesday.</u>
Tues Aug 28	Chap 1. Democracy and American Politics. Discussion on democracy, majority rule, minority rights. Service Learning discussion of details ahead
Thurs Aug 30	Native American political issues:: Choctaw guest speaker scheduled. Weather permitting; this includes an explanation on site of the Native American prayer circle behind LAB. (Participation points will be awarded.)
Sept 4 & 6	Chap 2. The U.S. Constitution
Sept 11 & 13	Chap 6: News Media (Chap 5: optional) Due Thursday: brief paper (1 pg. on media bias; details given in class)
Tues Sept 18	<i>Due: first Service Learning report (& 2 hours completed; signed timesheet)</i>
Thurs & 20	Federalist 10 (Appendix A 13-15) Chap. 7: Interest groups, Business Corporations
Sept 25 & 27	Chap 8. Social Movements Due Thursday: brief paper (1 pg) on a social movement (details given in class)
Tues Oct 2	Chap 9: Political Parties (Optional: Chap 10: Participation, Voting, Elections (pages 293-304) [Reminder: Due Oct 23: 2-pg. paper on City Hall, County Council, Planning Commission, or Court visit -see details above in Requirements section.]
Thurs Oct 4	Mid Term Exam distributed in class; due back by start of class Tuesday Oct. 9.
Tues Oct 9	Chap 11: Congress. Introduction to federal government Due. Turn in mid-term at start of class.
Thurs Oct 11	Theme: Congress: discussions/activities

- Tues Oct 16 ***Due. Second Service Learning Report with 4 hours signed completion. Come to class prepared to discuss the policy implications of your service-learning project.***
Reflection/discussion on Service Learning and links to government policy. No readings. Topic of discussion/activity to be decided by class. 😊
- Thurs Oct 18 Fall Break
- Tues Oct 23 **Chap 12: The President**
Due: City Hall paper (2 pages) (can be postponed to Oct. 25 by majority vote of class). This is worth two brief papers.
- Thurs Oct 25 **Theme: The President: class discussions/activities**
Due: Brief paper (2 pgs) on the presidency
- Tues Oct 30 **Chap 13: The Federal Bureaucracy**
Study question: how does the federal bureaucracy affect what we do; and how can we influence what they do?
Due: Third Service Learning report with 7 hours completed & signed
- Thurs Nov 1 **Theme: The Federal Bureaucracy: class discussion/activities**
- Tues Nov 6 **Chap 14: The Courts**
Due: Fourth Service Learning report with 10 signed hours completed. Submit with completed time sheet signed attached.
Come to class prepared to discuss the policy implications of your Service Learning Project
- Thurs Nov 8 **Due. Brief paper on a TV court case.** (Details given in class)
- Tues Nov 13 **Chap 15: Freedom: Struggle for Civil Liberties**
- Thurs Nov 15 **Due: Final Service Learning Policy Paper**
Reflection/discussion of Service Learning
Final exam handed out
- Tues Nov. 20 No class – in partial recognition of your out-of-class assignments 😊
- Nov 22 Thanksgiving Break
- Tues Nov 27 **Chap 16: Civil Rights: Struggle for Political Equality**
Due: turn in final exam at start of class
Due: last day to turn in any late papers

Thurs Nov 29 **Due Thursday: brief paper(1 pg)** on a current civil rights issue (attach one news clip) (no late paper for this assignment accepted)

Tues Dec 4 (last class) **Class debate.**

VIII Calendar of Due dates (friendly reminders)

Calendar of Written Assignments and Exams (stick it on the fridge)

- Tues Sep 11 brief paper on media (1page)
- Tues Sep 18 First service-learning report & signed completion 2 hours service (2 pgs)
- Thurs Sep 27 brief paper on a social movement (1 pg)
- Thurs Oct 4 Mid-term handed out.
- Tues Oct 9 Mid-term handed in at start of class
- Thurs Oct 16 2nd service-learning report & signed completion 4 hours service (2 pgs)
- Tues Oct 25 City Hall paper (2 pages): worth two brief papers
- Thurs Oct 25 brief paper on presidency (2 pages); details in class
- Tues Oct 30 3rd service-learning report; signed completion 7 hours service (2 pgs)
- Tues Nov 6 4th service-learning report; signed completion 10 hours service (2 pgs)
- Thurs Nov 8 brief paper (1 page) on a court case (details in class)
- Thurs Nov. 15 Final Service-learning report (3 pages)
- Thurs Nov 15 Final exam handed out
- Thurs Nov 27 Final exam handed in at start of class
- Thurs Nov 27 Last day to turn in any late papers for any late credit
- Thurs Nov 29 brief paper on a current civil rights issue (2 pages) WITH 2 related clippings

The following statement by an educator in the mid-1800s has relevancy for today:

“You are not engaged so much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism. A certain amount of knowledge you can indeed with average faculties acquire so as to retain; nor need you regret the hours spent on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions.

But you go to school not for knowledge as much as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment’s notice a new intellectual posture, for the art of entering quickly into a person’s thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the habit of what is possible in a given time, for taste, for discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness. Above all, you go to school for self-knowledge.”

William Cory – Master at Eaton College - 1861