

Rhodes College
Department of Political Science

Political Science 151
U.S. Politics
Fall 2004

Mr. Wirls
Buckman 303
Office Hours: MWF 1:00-2:30

Required Texts:

American Government, Landy and Milkis

Readings in American Government, Mary Nichols and David Nichols eds.

The Bill, Steven Waldman

The Elements of Style, Strunk and White

* * *

When we pass from the works of nature, in which all the delineations are perfectly accurate and appear to be otherwise only from the imperfection of the eye which surveys them, to the institutions of man, in which the obscurity arises as well from the object itself as from the organ by which it is contemplated, we must perceive the necessity of moderating still further our expectations and hopes from the efforts of human sagacity.

James Madison

American government is, strictly speaking, an arrangement of institutions for enacting and enforcing laws. As with machines, if we study only the motions of these institutions, we will see but a small part of what they were doing and almost nothing of *why* they were doing it in this or that way. The arrangement of these mechanisms of government reflect an understanding of the purposes of government and of the characteristics of those who will be, directly and indirectly, running the government.

A study of American government will, therefore, involve careful thinking about questions philosophical and psychological. What ought to be the ends of government, and how can human beings secure those ends? But we should not assume that desirable goals and human behavior are readily compatible. We will look at the mechanisms, institutions, of government as crucial means for reconciling goals and motives in political practice. Our study will, therefore, be about securing as much good, or as little harm, as is possible under the circumstances. That is the essence of politics. That is what makes political thinking so demanding and satisfying.

Consequently, you should expect the study of politics in the United States to be very difficult. Our work will relate to what you see in the world, but only gradually. You should bring your immediate interests and opinions to the readings and to class, but be prepared to see their deficiencies. We cannot decide intelligently (as opposed to what most journalists do) whether George W. Bush has been a good president, or whether this Congress has been successful, without a thorough understanding of the context: what are *reasonable* expectations?

A course of study should change your life, how you think about and address the world around you. It should not trade old prejudices for new ones, but rather turn prejudice into reasoned opinion. This requires three disciplines. One is that *you must be willing to expose your opinions and examine them, to argue with the readings, with your classmates, myself included.* Another discipline is that you doubt the sufficiency and soundness of your prejudices and opinions; as better evidence and reasoning is presented, you should be willing to modify or abandon them.

The third discipline is crucial: *careful reading.* Much of what we will read is densely reasoned, strange, offensive, and, therefore, difficult. React to what you read, but also attend carefully to the argument. Defects in an argument are to be found not in its conclusions but in the evidence and logic that lead to the conclusions. Allow your distaste for a conclusion to drive you to find flaws in what supports it. The more carefully you read, the more accurately you will think, and the more accurately you think, the better you will write, and the better you write...you get the picture.

What, therefore, will our classes be like? We are here not to swallow knowledge stones but to learn how to digest, how to integrate ideas and information into our thinking about the world and our lives. Class should engage all of us, therefore, in learning *as an activity.* I will say much. You should say much more. You may interrupt me. You may begin the class with a question, a statement, an observation. I will proceed, more or less, according to the syllabus, but my aim is not simply to plow through it. If you are not satisfied with your grasp of the materials and problems, you should say so. *If you are not satisfied or are confused, you are far from alone.*

Finally, learning is a continuous activity which should unite all of the individual aspects of your life here and beyond. More narrowly, you should not treat class time and office hours as wholly distinct things. *Some of the best and most enjoyable learning occurs one-on-one.* If you have a question, something you want to discuss, whatever, come for a visit. You will be welcomed.

The graded requirements are: three essays (60%), attendance, participation, and daily questions (30%), and a final exam (10%). *Late papers will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade per day. If you do not complete and submit **all** written work, you **will** fail the course.*

N.B. You must, at the end of all of your written work, **affirm your adherence to the principles and terms of the College's honor code.** You are responsible for reading and understanding that code. In particular, you must become very familiar with the various forms of plagiarism. Plagiarism is a cardinal academic sin, and *ignorance will not be accepted as an excuse.* If you are ever unsure about its meaning and any particular application, ask me or a writing center tutor.

You are, in this course, allowed to discuss the paper and exam topics *with other members of this class*. But such discussions must be limited to the substance of the question and the relevant readings. *They must not extend into the outlining, writing, and rewriting of the essays.*

Assignments:

- Aug. 25 I. Introduction: Roasting Old Chestnuts Over a Burning Flag
- Aug. 27 II. Politics and politics in the United States
A. *American Government*, chapter 1, chapter 2 (through p. 33)
- Aug. 30 B. Lincoln-Douglas debates (academic volume)
- III. Human Nature, Natural Rights, and Political Order
- Sept. 1 A. The Meaning of Equality and Liberty:
Vonnegut: "Harrison Bergeron" (Nichols: #80)
Jefferson: "Natural Aristocracy" (Nichols: #81)
- Sept. 3 B. Human nature and the purposes of government:
American Government, pp. 33- 49
The Declaration of Independence (Nichols: #1)
Lincoln: "The Meaning of the Declaration" (Nichols: #2)
- Sept. 8 C. The Declaration of Independence (Nichols: #1)
(Elements of Style I: quiz)
- Sept. 10 D. Human nature and political order: "To secure these rights..."
1. Political science and complex government
a) Early American constitutions and the constitutional convention: *American Government*, pp. 49-62, 80-87
- Sept. 13 b) The Constitution: *American Government*, Appendix 2, and pp. 97-100
- Sept. 15 2. Securing our rights: Is a bill of rights enough?
a) *Federalist* #84 (acad. prog.)
- Sept. 17 **Writing:** Elements of Style II

- Oct. 15 B. Development:
 American Government, pp. 162-187
- VI. Constitutional government: Liberty, citizenship, and civil rights
- Oct. 20 A. *Brown v. Board of Ed.* (Nichols: #77)
 American Government, pp. 510-512, 369-71, 529-533
- Oct. 22 B. Affirmative action
- VI. Constitutional government: National institutions and powers
- A. The judiciary and judicial review:
- Oct. 25 1) *American Government*, pp. 337-344
 Marbury v. Madison (Nichols: #50)
- Oct. 27 2) "Brutus XV" (Nichols: #47)
 Jefferson, *Against Judicial Review* (Nichols: #48)
 Lincoln, *Authority of the Supreme Court* (Nichols: #49)
- Oct. 29 3) *American Government*, pp. 349-351
 Brennan (Nichols: ##53)
 Roe v. Wade (Nichols: #74)
- Nov. 1 The election: issues
- Nov. 3 The election: results
- B. Political parties
- Nov. 5 1) *American Government*, pp. 445-478
- Nov. 8 2) Separated powers, gridlock, and party government
 Lloyd Cutler: "To Form a Government" (Nichols: #30)
- C. Presidential government?
- Nov. 10 1) The constitutional presidency
 Constitution: Article II, Sections 2-3
 American Government: pp. 285-294
 Federalist (Nichols: #36)
- Nov. 12 2) The democratic presidency:
 American Government, pp. 303-304
 Tulis, "Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency" (Nichols: #37)
 The Bill, chapter 1

