AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

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Course Description and Goals:
American government is a survey course intended to increase the student’s understanding of the institutions and processes of American democracy. The theme of the class is “How well does our democracy work?” and course materials, which include lectures, readings, audio-visual presentations and in-class discussions, are approached from this perspective. The class will assess critically the Constitution of the U.S. and the operation of representative democratic government under that Constitution, and explain the processes and interaction between political and civic institutions.

Lecture Topics, Reading Assignments and Test Dates:

**Section 1: The Constitution and the Presidency**
*Irony of Democracy*: Chapters 1, 2, and 10
Test 1

**Section 2: Voting, Media, Political Advertising**
*Irony of Democracy*: Chapters 5, 6, and 8
Test 2

**Section 3: Civil Liberties, Civil Rights and the Courts**
*Irony of Democracy*: Chapters 13, 15 and 16
Test 3

**Section 4: Congress, Parties, Interest Groups**
*Irony of Democracy*: Chapters 7, 9 and 12
Test 4:

Grading: The course grade is based on 200 possible points from all the tests plus the writing portfolio. To earn an “A” grade one must have 180 points; a “B” requires 160 points; a “C” requires 120 points.
1) The four tests are **140 points** total (35 points each) and final essay **10 points**.
2) Writing Portfolio: **50 points** possible. Includes all Assignment 1 (Short papers) and Assignment 2 (Research report). The writing portfolio is graded in its entirety, based on whether all assignments are completed and the content and quality of the writing. An excellent portfolio earns 50 points, a good portfolio earns between 40-49 points, and an average portfolio between 30-39 points. An excellent portfolio would include all assignments fully completed as assigned and writing of consistently good quality.
Assignments:
There are two required assignments in this course. Assignment 1 involves five short papers and class discussions on those papers. Assignment 2 is a 2-page research report.

Assignment 1 Short papers and discussions
Periodically (see dates and topics on page three) we will hold in-class discussions on important political issues. To receive credit for this assignment, you must submit five short papers (1-2 pages) and attend the class discussions on those five topics. Students can select from the articles and topics provided. These short papers serve as the basis for your participation in the in-class discussions.
You should:
a) Read the article carefully;
b) Understand the author’s main theme or argument (These are professional articles and they have an organizing idea---please do not offer a critique suggesting “it makes no sense” or something to that effect);
c) Summarize this theme in the first paragraph of your paper;
d) In the remainder of your paper focus on an aspect of the topic/article that you find interesting and discuss it (you can offer your opinion and/or bring in other information that you find pertinent).
e) The written summaries must be turned in the beginning of the class session on the day of the discussion. These papers will be signed and dated by me, and then returned to you for submission in your “written work folder” at the last week of class. Be sure to pick up your paper after class. I am not responsible for papers not picked up.

All articles are on Blackboard and also online at www.saddleback.edu/faculty/agordon

1. Leaders Should Not Follow Opinion Polls
2. TV AD Wars
3. One Nation, Slightly Divisible
4. Vanishing Voter
5. The Reasoning Voter
6. Death Penalty
7. Bias of Language and Pictures
8. VMI: Woman in the Barracks
9. Incendiary Speech--In Defense of Prejudice
10. Option Four
11. Americans Are Right to Resist
12. Women in Campaigns

Assignment 2 Research Paper
This assignment is a research report (approximately 2 pages in length) that requires you to do a simple case study. First, you need to select a specific federal or state law, city ordinance, etc. (I will give you examples in the first day of class). The paper should have
three parts. First, you should summarize the legislative act or proposal, including a clear explanation of its central purpose, i.e., what the law intends to prohibit, regulate or encourage. Next, analyze the political dynamics behind the law by explaining who (an individual, corporation, interest group, etc.) worked to get this law passed, modified, or even stopped completely. Include a discussion of why they were specifically interested in this law’s passage or its modification. (Note: In some cases it might be more revealing to focus on its implementation). Finally, evaluate the law under discussion by indicating whether you believe your case is evidence of the political process working properly, or, on the other hand, it is an example of government not serving the public interest. To make the assignment more enjoyable, I suggest you pick something that is personally relevant, connected to your career interests, or at least somewhat intriguing. Be sure to cite your sources in the written paper.

To help you get an idea of how to find a law for your research report, on this and the last page of the syllabus I’ve provided some sample websites that discuss laws and proposals.

www.statenet.com (tracks legislative issues)
http://www.rtknet.org/ (Public interest group)
www.protect.org (Child protection)
www.sierraclub.org (Environmental group)
www.citizen.org (Public interest group)
www.nra.org (Guns)
www.peta.org (Animal protection)
www.aspca.org (Animal protection)
www.cato.org (Libertarian think tank)
www.carlemon.com (Car laws)
www.nrdc.org (Environmental group)
http://thomas.loc.gov/ (General source for federal legislation--very comprehensive)
http://www.cc.org/ (Conservative Christian group)
www.commoncause.org (Public interest group)
http://www.now.org/ (National Organization for Women)
http://www.nrcl.org/ (Pro-choice group)
http://www.fda.gov/ (Food and Drug Administration)
http://feinstein.senate.gov/legislation.html (California Senator--all politicians have such sites)
http://www.minutemanproject.com (Group supporting stricter immigration enforcement)
www.consumerwatchdog.org (public interest group)
www.findlaw.com (general use legal website)
http://www.ab1634.com/ab1634_Docs.htm (good example of a website for a specific law)