Introduction to
American and Texas Politics
POLS 2305–95L, Summer I 2018

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About the Course
The primary purpose of this course is to acquaint students with the main features of our national government and, more broadly, with politics in the United States of America. As with any introductory course, this means we will cover the basic structure and functioning of the formal institutions of government—in other words, how government works, and what it can and can’t do. In doing so, we will be careful to separate the ideas from the reality—to consider how our system is supposed to work as well as think critically about how it actually does work. But there’s a lot more to politics than that. In addition to the formal structures of politics, we’ll consider some of the most important social forces that affect how government works, such as the media and economic actors. We’ll look at US political culture, including our ideas about democracy and equality and the proper role of government in society. We’ll also explore the meaning of politics in everyday life, and what difference collective action can make.

It is impossible to teach a class on US politics without it being affected by current events, and politics today is quite different from what we’re used to. Love it or hate it, the current administration’s approach to governing is not like anything this country has ever seen. Just as an example, presidents are normally very reserved and only communicate with the public in very controlled, measured ways, always careful about what they’re saying in case it gets taken in a way that’s different from what they want, and incredibly cautious about revealing anything that might reveal national secrets or affect delicate political balances. We have never had a president who tweets whatever is on his mind at 3:30am. We’ve also never had a president before with no political experience. Trump’s campaign broke with long-standing traditions of politics, and his administration continues to do so. For political scientists, these are exciting, if somewhat confusing and aggravating, times.

But the radically different character of the administration is not the only element that is significantly different about national politics today. Trump became president despite having gotten almost 3 million fewer votes than his opponent, Hillary Clinton (if you don’t know how that could have happened, I’ll explain in section 2.2 when I go over the executive branch). He started out with the lowest popularity ratings of anyone to win the presidency since they started measuring popularity. Remarkably, his popularity only got worse from there, although it has now improved somewhat. All of the controversy over links between his campaign and the
Russian government, as well as the seeming chaos in the White House, are not helping him.

Another fairly unusual condition in national politics these days is that Republicans control all three parts of the law-making apparatus—the presidency, the House of Representatives, and the Senate. As I’ll discuss in Section 2.1, this is unusual. But, despite this level of control over the political process, Republicans have still found themselves unable to make much progress in passing laws and actually running the government.

One of the reasons for the Republicans’ difficulties has been that there has been a flowering of groups that call themselves “the resistance,” that identify themselves as opposing his administration and the Republican agenda. The day after he was inaugurated saw the largest demonstrations in US history. Even the normally-sleepy Rio Grande Valley has seen an unprecedented level of political activism, mostly directed against President Trump and the Republican Congress.

Political events have, in fact, come close to home here in the RGV, with stepped-up enforcement of immigration laws and increased deportations affecting many families. Big sections of the “big, beautiful wall” Mr. Trump wants to build would run through the Rio Grande Valley, destroying important wildlife habitat in sensitive areas and potentially undermining the tourist industry that is one of the most important elements of the local economy. Many people in the area have opposed the plans for a wall from the beginning, and if the building plans proceed, we may see some fireworks over that locally.

Other events, including extreme events such as terrorist acts and killing of civilians by police and the public response to these, touch on important issues that are also political in nature. To participate in the on-line class discussions, you’ll find it helpful to stay informed about what’s happening by reading news reports from credible sources or watching the news.

**Course Objectives and Student Learning Outcomes**

This course fulfills half of the U.S. and Texas government requirements established by the Regents of the University of Texas. Students completing the course will have a better understanding of the structure and character of U.S. institutions of government, to help them to become more active citizens and more effective participants in our political systems. As a result of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify key elements of the U.S. political system and how they relate to one another.
- Recognize the primary ideological principles, such as equality, democracy and republicanism, that contribute to the distinctiveness of the U.S. political system.
- Recognize the major social and economic forces that affect politics at the national scale.
- Identify the role of citizens in the political system.

*In addition, the State of Texas requires that I include these Course Objectives on my syllabus:*

1. To demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the separation of powers as described in the U.S. and Texas constitutions;
2. To demonstrate knowledge and understanding of Congress and its institutions;
3. To demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the Presidency and the workings of federal agencies;
4. To demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the judicial system

Learning Objectives for Core Curriculum Requirements
Because this course fulfills a core area requirement in Government/Political Science the class also includes the following learning objectives:

(i) Courses in this category focus on consideration of the Constitution of the United States and the constitutions of the states, with special emphasis on that of Texas.

(ii) Courses in this area involve the analysis of governmental institutions, political behavior, civic engagement, and their political and philosophical foundations.

(iii) The following four core objectives must be addressed in each course approved to fulfill this category requirement: Critical Thinking Skills, Communication Skills, Personal Responsibility, and Social Responsibility.

The core objectives are defined as:

*Critical Thinking*
Students will demonstrate comprehension of a variety of written texts and other information sources by analyzing and evaluating the logic, validity, and relevance of the information in them to solve challenging problems, to arrive at well-reasoned conclusions, and to develop and explore new questions.

*Communication Skills*
Students will demonstrate the ability to adapt their communications to a particular context, audience, and purpose using language, genre conventions, and sources appropriate to a specific discipline and/or communication task.

*Personal Responsibility*
Students will demonstrate an awareness of the range of human values and beliefs that they draw upon to connect choices, actions, and consequences to ethical decision-making.

*Social Responsibility*
Students will recognize and describe cultural diversity, the role of civic engagement in society, and the link between ethics and behavior.

The university requires that you take a short assessment exam to test your level of attainment of these core objectives. The exam will be available from July 3 to July 11. As these objectives relate to skills, not knowledge, the test is not based on the course content and your score on the test will not affect your grade. However, failure to take the test will result in a reduction of points.
from your final grade.

**Structure of the Course**

Access the course sections through Blackboard. Start by reading over the Welcome message in the Start Here area. Then select the “Section Modules” menu item and click on “Section 1: Foundations” to get started. You will find handouts of the lecture slides posted for each unit. Review the handouts, watch the lecture, take the quiz, and post a comment or two in the discussion board (see below for more detail). From time to time you should also do a current events journal (see below). There is also a midterm essay exam, which you will do after completing Section 2.

This course will be taught entirely online in an asynchronous manner. What that means is that there will be no class meetings where students and the professor interact in person. However, I can be available to meet with students, either at my office or online, whenever necessary. But all of the lectures are delivered via pre-recorded videos that are on YouTube that you will access through Blackboard.*

The course is broken up into sections of three or four units each, for a total of fourteen units. Each unit is broken up into three or four videos. For each unit there is a quiz; at the end of each section there is an exam. The quizzes can be seen as a way to check your understanding of a topic prior to taking the exam—if you don’t do well on a quiz, you may want to review the lecture again and re-take the quiz before taking the exam. You can take a quiz twice if you aren’t happy with your score the first time, but you can only take an exam once. Completing a unit requires taking the unit quiz; completing a section requires taking the section exam. You can’t advance from one unit to the next until you’ve taken the quiz, and you can’t advance from one section to the next until you’ve taken the exam. And you can’t take the final exam until you’ve completed all of the sections. It’s a system designed to step you along through the course. For more information on quizzes and exams, see Course Requirements, below.

You may complete the sections of the course at your own pace. However, you must complete the course by Tuesday, July 10. I will be monitoring students’ activity in the course as the term goes on and will send out notices if I see students falling behind. Students who are deemed to not be making sufficient progress on the basis of the number of quizzes and exams they have completed by June 22 will be dropped from the course.

* Most of the videos were recorded in 2014 and updated in 2015 when the course was a bit different (“GOVT 2301”) and was taught at UT Brownsville (please excuse the references to UTB in the title slides!). Big changes that came with the election of a new president in 2016 have required fairly extensive updates. In most cases I have edited the existing videos, although some entirely new videos were recorded in 2017. Also, I may change how you access the videos by making them available through Blackboard’s Tegrity function.
Sections and Units

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<th>Relevant book chapter</th>
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<td>Foundations: Democracy</td>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
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<td>Revolution and Constitution</td>
<td>Chapter 2 &amp; on Blackboard</td>
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<td>Social Movements</td>
<td>Chapter 11</td>
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Course Material


Course Requirements

1. **Quizzes and exams:** There will be a quiz at the conclusion of each unit on the material covered in that unit, and an exam at the conclusion of each section. Each quiz may be taken twice. You must complete each unit quiz in order to advance to the next unit, and you must complete each section exam to advance to the next section. These quizzes and exams will assess your understanding of the course material and your progress toward meeting the course objectives of critical thinking, personal responsibility, and social responsibility.

2. **Midterm Essay Exam:** 2-3 page essay exam. Details available after completing Section 2. The question(s), and your responses, will be used to assess your progress toward meeting the four core objectives of critical thinking, communication skills, personal responsibility, and social responsibility.

3. **Comprehensive final exam:** In order to take the final exam, you must have completed all of the unit quizzes and section exams.

4. **Discussion board:** A discussion board has been created for each unit with a set of questions. Discuss those questions in the discussion forum on Blackboard—in a respectful manner—with your classmates. Students are expected to post one original comment and two replies in each unit. Getting 100% on this assignment requires accumulating 100 points. See below for discussion board rules and the grading rubric. This assignment will be used to assess your progress toward meeting the core objectives of critical thinking and
communication skills.

5. **Current events journal**: The best way to learn about politics is to follow the news. Each student is expected to post ten current events journals. You can post once per day. Each post is graded on a ten-point scale. Getting 100% on this assignment requires accumulating 100 points. See below for more information on the current events journal. *This assignment will be used to assess your progress toward meeting the core objectives of communication skills, personal responsibility, and social responsibility.*

6. **Core Objectives Assessment Exam**: UTRGV requires that you take a short assessment exam to test your level of attainment of the core objectives listed above. The exam will be available during the last two weeks of the semester. As these objectives relate to skills, not knowledge, the test is not based on the course content and your score on the test will not affect your grade. However, failure to take the test will result in a reduction of points from your final grade.

**Grading Policy**

Grades will be based on the quality of the work submitted. The final grade will be computed based on the weights given above. Final grades will be full-letter grades based on the final score: A (90%–100%), B (80%–89.99%), C (70%–79.99%), D (60%–69.99%) and F (59.99% and below). No extra credit will be given at any time.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grading item</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unit Quizzes (14)</td>
<td>50 points each</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Section Exams (4)</td>
<td>100 points each</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm Essay Exam</td>
<td>100 points</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Exam</td>
<td>100 points</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion Board</td>
<td>100 total points</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current Events Journal</td>
<td>100 total points</td>
<td>10%</td>
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**Discussion Board Rules**

In discussion forums, you learn from one another by posing questions, justifying your comments, and encountering multiple perspectives. When you prepare for discussions through thoughtful reflection, you contribute to your own successful learning experience as well as to the experience of your peers.

Each segment concludes with a set of questions, and each question will be set up as a discussion thread on Blackboard; there will also be a thread for discussing current events. Discuss the questions with your peers through the discussion board by posting your own responses to the questions and responding to your classmates’ posts. Apply critical thinking to the material in the lecture, book and/or your understanding of current events to consider the question being asked. Note that you do not have to respond to every question in every unit, but you are expected to post one original comment and two replies in each unit.

The discussion board will not be moderated, which means I will not review posts before they are
made public. However, your posts will be graded, so the quality of your posts matters. Remember your “netiquette.” Failure to follow these rules will result in the entry or entries deleted and points deducted.

- Be respectful of opposing views
- Write in complete sentences
- Pay attention to sentence structure and spelling

**Netiquette**

Students are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner in online interactions. Netiquette describes the code of conduct for online activities. It ensures respect for others and prevents misunderstandings or unintentional offenses to others. The netiquette described here is amended to ensure your success in this course.

- When you are typing or submitting a response, avoid using all capital letters (caps). Caps is equal to SHOUTING YOUR MESSAGE.
- Although people commonly use abbreviations (u, yr, gr8) and acronyms when texting or in casual communication (for example, LOL, ROFL, BTW, or FYI), avoid using these in your posts.
- Students are encouraged to comment, question, or critique an idea but students are not to attack an individual. It is important to foster a safe learning environment.

**Discussion board grading**

The discussion board accounts for **10 percent of your grade**; you are expected to **accumulate 100 points over the course of the term**. Each set of posts in a unit will be graded on a nine-point scale. Part of the grade is simply quantitative: You get two points for an original post (a direct response to the question posed in the thread) and one point each for reply, for up to four points. If you do more posts than required (either original posts or replies), you can earn an extra point, for a maximum possible of 10 points in each unit.

There is also a qualitative evaluation of your posts according to the following rubric, for up to five points:

1. Fails to demonstrate any understanding of the question or material. Posts that merely state agreement or disagreement with a prior post will only get one point.
2. Shows a limited understanding of the question or material and/or has some significant problems, including poor writing skills.
3. Demonstrates an acceptable level of understanding but has problems with comprehension and/or writing skills.
4. Reflects a good level of understanding and is written clearly.
5. Shows a very good level of understanding, reflects critical engagement with the subject, and has few or no writing errors.

**Current Events Journals**

Some kind of political news is happening pretty much all the time. Summer is often a quiet time
for politics, but with given what has happened so far with this administration, we can expect to find a number of interesting stories pretty much every day. Be sure to follow the detailed instructions included in the Current Events Journals section on Blackboard. Students are expected to post ten journals over the course of the term. These are graded on a 10-point scale as detailed in the instructions.

**Communication**

**Note:** UTRGV policy is that all email communication from faculty must go to students’ UTRGV e-mail addresses, which are given to you when you enroll (the one ending @utrgv.edu). If you do not regularly check this address, see the Help Desk for assistance setting up mail forwarding so you will get announcements and email. Also, from time to time I will send out important information via Blackboard announcements, make sure you set your Blackboard preferences for this course to receive them.

**Feedback on assignments:** All of the discussions boards involve responding to questions I will pose for you. For the most part, I will stay out of the discussions unless I think there’s a problem. I want to see what you think. Every once in a while I may intervene by asking additional questions or maybe providing some information.

Because of the volume of graded material, I won’t give feedback on every discussion post, current events journal, or essay. But when I think you will get some direct benefit from a comment, I will offer it. And, if you ever want to know why you got a particular grade, please send me an email and I’ll be happy to go over it with you. We can use Blackboard Collaborate so we can do virtual office hours in real time.

**Email:** If you send me an email, please allow up to 24 hours for a response. I’m usually much faster than that, but not always. If you haven’t heard back from me within 24 hours, try again—you’re first attempt may have gotten buried.

**Office hours:** Since this is an on-line course, I will not hold regular office hours, but if you want to meet with me we can do so, either in my office or online via Blackboard Collaborate, except during the last week of June when I will be traveling to a conference. If you have technical difficulties with Blackboard, please contact the COLTT Help Desk.

**Sources**

Most of the material used in the lectures is based on the textbook, although the way I present it often reflects my own long engagement with politics over the past 40 years. I have also done research in order to update the data I present, which is usually cited in the lecture slides. Some additional sources include:

- The Federalist Papers ([https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1404/1404-h/1404-h.htm](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1404/1404-h/1404-h.htm))
- Congressional Research Service ([http://www.loc.gov/crsinfo/](http://www.loc.gov/crsinfo/))
- The White House ([https://www.politico.com/](https://www.politico.com/))
Business Insider (http://www.businessinsider.com/)
Forbes Magazine (https://www.forbes.com)
Real Clear Politics (https://www.realclearpolitics.com/)
Politico (https://www.politico.com/)
Center for Responsive Politics (https://www.opensecrets.org/)
And, on occasion and with caution, Wikipedia

**Technical Requirements**

No special technology is required for this course, either hardware or software. You will access all of the course material through Blackboard and YouTube. Everything you need is available on campus in the various computer labs and the libraries. If you are using your own, you shouldn’t need anything more substantial than the sort of equipment you use for other classes.

**Computer Hardware**

To participate in this course, you should have easy access to a computer less than 5-years old with high-speed internet connection via cable modem, LAN or DSL.

**Student Technical Skills**

You are expected to be proficient with installing and using basic computer applications and have the ability to send and receive email attachments.

**Software**

- Mozilla’s Firefox (latest version; Macintosh or Windows)
- Google Chrome (latest version; Macintosh or Windows)
- Adobe’s Flash Player & Acrobat Reader plug-in (latest version).
- Apple’s QuickTime plug-in (latest version).
- Virus protection
- Microsoft Office

**University Policies**

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:**

If you have a documented disability (physical, psychological, learning, or other disability which affects your academic performance) and would like to receive academic accommodations, please inform your instructor and contact Student Accessibility Services to schedule an appointment to initiate services. It is recommended that you schedule an appointment with Student Accessibility Services before classes start. However, accommodations can be provided at any time.

**Brownsville Campus:** Student Accessibility Services is located in Cortez Hall Room 129 and can be contacted by phone at (956) 882-7374 (Voice) or via email at accessibility@utrgv.edu. **Edinburg Campus:** Student Accessibility Services is located in 108 University Center and can be contacted by phone at (956) 665-7005 (Voice), (956) 665-3840 (Fax), or via email at accessibility@utrgv.edu.

**MANDATORY COURSE EVALUATION PERIOD:**
Students are required to complete an ONLINE evaluation of this course, accessed through your UTRGV account; you will be contacted through email with further instructions. Students who complete their evaluations will have priority access to their grades.

**SCHOLASTIC INTEGRITY:**
As members of a community dedicated to Honesty, Integrity and Respect, students are reminded that those who engage in scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and expulsion from the University. Scholastic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, plagiarism, and collusion; submission for credit of any work or materials that are attributable in whole or in part to another person; taking an examination for another person; any act designed to give unfair advantage to a student; or the attempt to commit such acts. Since scholastic dishonesty harms the individual, all students and the integrity of the University, policies on scholastic dishonesty will be strictly enforced (Board of Regents Rules and Regulations and UTRGV Academic Integrity Guidelines). All scholastic dishonesty incidents will be reported to the Dean of Students.

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT, DISCRIMINATION, and VIOLENCE:**
In accordance with UT System regulations, your instructor is a “responsible employee” for reporting purposes under Title IX regulations and so must report any instance, occurring during a student’s time in college, of sexual assault, stalking, dating violence, domestic violence, or sexual harassment about which she/he becomes aware during this course through writing, discussion, or personal disclosure. More information can be found at: UTRGV Equity Information, including confidential resources available on campus. The faculty and staff of UTRGV actively strive to provide a learning, working, and living environment that promotes personal integrity, civility, and mutual respect in an environment free from sexual misconduct and discrimination. The Institutional Policies are located at the website: UTRGV Institutional Policies.

**COURSE DROPS:**
Students are responsible for ensuring that they maintain steady progress in the course by regularly visiting the course site on Blackboard, watching the lecture videos, participating in on-line discussions, and completing assignments. Students who regularly fail to complete assignments will be dropped from the course by November 15, the final official drop date. Students will be notified at least a week in advance if they are at risk of being dropped.

According to UTRGV policy, students may drop any class without penalty earning a grade of DR until the official drop date. Following that date, students must be assigned a letter grade and can no longer drop the class. Students considering dropping the class should be aware of the “3-peat rule” and the “6-drop” rule so they can recognize how dropped classes may affect their academic success. The 6-drop rule refers to Texas law that dictates that undergraduate students may not drop more than six courses during their undergraduate career. Courses dropped at other Texas public higher education institutions will count toward the six-course drop limit. The 3-peat rule refers to additional fees charged to students who take the same class for the third time.