Political Science 1 – American Government

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Course Objectives:
This is a survey course in American Government intended to meet transfer requirements for colleges and universities. During this term students will cover a wide variety of subjects within this area. Students will examine the period leading up to and through the drafting of the Constitution as a way of understanding the continuing evolution of the American political system. We will explore the idea of Federalism as it pertains to the functioning of the three branches of government, the interaction of federal, state, and local governments, and the role of other groups (i.e. the media, public, bureaucracy, interest groups, etc.) in this system. There will be a strong emphasis put on the importance of citizen involvement in democracies.

Course Goals:
At the end of this semester, students should have a basic concept of the following:
- Three branches of government and the system of checks and balances.
- The US electoral system, including primary and general elections and the popular and electoral votes.
- The role of public opinion, interest groups, and the media on the development of government policies.
- The importance of citizen participation in a democracy.

Texts:

Teaching Approach:
Class time will be spent on lectures, class discussions, videos, and in-class projects designed to help students understand more fully the topics under study.

Grading:
Grades in this course will be calculated on the basis of exams, the final exam, quizzes, class/homework, and a community project or paper.

Exams:
There will be a total of three exams and one final exam. Of the first three, I will drop the lowest score when calculating your course grade. The final exam will not be dropped for any reason. The exams will be based on materials covered in class, as well as any material you were expected to cover outside of class. The exam format will consist of true/false, multiple choice, and essay/short answer questions. I will try to work time into our schedule to accommodate reviews. The final exam will be comprehensive. Please note that I will not give makeup exams under any circumstances. An absence on a test day will result in a zero grade for that exam. The exam schedule is included in this outline.

Discussions:
There will be several opportunities for you as a class to hold discussions (See course schedule at the end of this outline for specific dates). Your participation in these is not simply appreciated, but the QUALITY of your participation will be graded. You are expected to come to class prepared to engage with your classmates on the topic at hand. I will not participate, except to keep you on track or correct misinformation. For those listed as TBA from the Andrews text I will give you prior notice of the selected readings you are to prepare. Discussions, in general, may cover materials from your texts, reputable news sources, or other outside materials.

Project:
One of the great things about our system of government – local, state, and national – is that government occurs in all aspects of our lives. Everyone, whether aware of it or not, is effected by and affects the
government. This assignment is designed to allow you to see how we as individuals interact with government and the great impact citizens can have on their communities. This assignment will involve you volunteering twenty (20) hours of your time to one NON-PROFIT community organization.

The first step you must take is to determine what type of NON-PROFIT organization you would like to volunteer with. Within the first three weeks of class you must clear your choice with me. One you have made a decision and have contacted the organization and made arrangements no changes will be allowed. Keep in mind that you need to select an organization that needs volunteers and has a schedule compatible with yours. It is not uncommon for you to have difficulty contacting organizations particularly since many of them are run primarily with the aid of volunteers. Do not waste your time – you don’t have that much to begin with. Keep many options open until you make your final decision.

You will be required to submit the following in order to receive full credit:
1. A short statement on the organization’s letterhead from your supervisor including your name, the exact number of hours you volunteered, your responsibilities and activities. The letter must be signed by your supervisor and must include the address and telephone number of the organization. (100 points).
2. You will need to keep a journal of your volunteer experience. The journal may consist of your reasons for selecting a particular organization, the search you undertook to locate the organization, what you learned from your experience, the activities you engaged in, etc. The journal does not have to be typed, but it must be legible – neatly written, complete sentences, proper spelling and punctuation, etc. The journal must contain a minimum of twenty (20) paragraphs. Each paragraph must consist of at least four to five sentences and be numbered. No fluff. (40 points).

Some potential volunteer ideas might be an interest group (i.e. NRA, NOW, ACLU, Global Exchange, PETA, AARP, ACU, LIFETIME, etc.), political parties (i.e. Democratic, Republican, Green, Libertarian, etc.), community centers, etc. I would encourage you to contact the Community Service Learning Center at West Valley for help in selecting a group in need of volunteers, try the Volunteer Center of Silicon Valley at volunteerexchange.org, or volunteersanjose.org.

Assignments (subject to change):
1. You will conduct one interview, write it up in Q & A format (3 pages typed, double-spaced), and turn it in. We will discuss them in class. You will need to take very good notes or use a recording device, of course with the permission of the individual being interviewed.

   Interview: Interview a person at least 25 years older than you about a significant political event he/she has experienced. The event can be local, state, national, or international. You may want to ask some of the following questions plus anything else you think would be important: Person’s name, age at the time of the event, how he/she first learned about the event, why the event was so important to him/her, other events that were occurring around the same time, his/her perspective on the event, etc.

2. Democracy Essay: This assignment requires you to think about what democracy means to you, not what a textbook, dictionary or instructor has told you. This entire essay must be written from your perspective without the use of any resources, including your textbook. Specifically, you must respond to the following questions.

   What does a democracy – in a perfect world – mean to you? Be very specific. What is/are the role(s) of citizens in a democracy? In your opinion, how well do you think we as a country are living up to being a democracy? Explain in detail.

**Other assignments will follow and specific information will be given as the semester progresses.

All assignments must be turned in stapled in the top left corner – NO folders
Late Work:
Late work will be penalized 25% for each day late. Plan ahead for anything that can go wrong and will go wrong.

Absences:
Excessive absences will negatively affect your grade and may result in your being dropped from the class. Do not come to me before an absence and ask, “Will I miss anything?” and similarly don’t return from an absence and ask, “Did I miss anything?” I will not suspend class simply because you are not there. Find a classmate to get missed notes and come see me if you have any further questions or concerns.

Cheating:
Cheating of any kind, including copying material directly from the original source, plagiarizing, will not be acceptable. It will result in a failing grade for the assignment and possibly for the class.

Cell Phones and Pagers:
All cell phones and pagers must be turned off while in class. If a device goes off during class you will be asked to gather your belongings and leave for the remainder of the session – this includes test days. NO excuses.

Extra Credit:
You may earn a maximum of 20 extra credit points for this class. Your options for earning the extra points are:

1. Attend a city council meeting, turn in the agenda and a one page reflection on the meeting (typed, double-spaced) 10 points
2. Attend a city or county government meeting - not another city council meeting, turn in an agenda and a one page reflection on the meeting (typed, double-spaced) 10 points
3. Another political event, cleared with the instructor first, turn in an agenda or business card, and a one page reflection on the event (typed, double-spaced) 10 points
4. Attend a school board meeting, turn in an agenda and a one page reflection on the meeting (typed, double-spaced) 10 points

**You may not do the same event twice.

Disability Statement:
West Valley College makes reasonable accommodations for persons with documented disabilities. College materials will be available in alternate formats (Braille, audio, electronic format, or large print) upon request. Please contact the Disability and Educational Support Program at (408) 741-2010 (voice) or (408) 741-2658 (TTY) for assistance.