Course Description: This course will examine American government from its beginnings to the present day. Primary objectives include developing an understanding of the origin and continuing evolution of American government, an appreciation of American democratic institutions, how Americans elect their leaders and how the different levels of American government (federal, state, and local) operate and interact with each other on a day-to-day basis.

In addition to the primary objectives, an ancillary objective is to provide students with an appreciation of the special nature of American government. It is different from all other forms of government in the world, including other democracies. It is unique. It is what makes America special. It, as one great American very eloquently stated many years ago, is a "government of the people, by the people and for the people." Of all of America's accomplishments, the maintenance, expansion, and refinement of our democratic processes may be the most significant. American government, as we shall see in many of the "at odds" issues we will discuss, is a continuing process. It is a work in progress that deserves the attention and study of all Americans. Moreover, it is an exciting subject and an important part of our heritage and legacy to future generations. Before we can protect it or improve it, we first need to understand it and how it works.

Course Prerequisites: There are no prerequisites.

Course Procedures: Lectures will supplement required readings in the textbook. Much of the lecture information will offer different or additional insights not found in the text. Attending class is an important element in student success in this course. A portion of the information that you will be asked to respond to on examinations will be from lectures and class discussion topics. If one of your goals is to do well on exams - come to class.

Class Participation: Individual participation in class is encouraged and expected. In addition to individual participation, there will be opportunities for participation in group work and discussion. Participation includes attendance. You can earn up to 15 points (15%) of your overall grade by simply coming to class. If your participation is notable in terms of contributions you make to class discussion then the percentage you might earn for "participation" can be even higher. Be prepared to participate individually and in class discussions. Reading the textbook and newspaper assignments prior to class is an essential element to success in this course and will permit you to better participate in class discussions. Again - come to class.

Attendance and lateness: Participation, as already mentioned, is a factor in a student's grade. Poor attendance affects a student's ability to participate and, in turn, affects a student's performance on exams and therefore a student's final grade. I expect you to attend class. If you are not going to be in class, I expect to be informed by e-mail. I will inform you if I am not going to be here for a class. I expect the same courtesy in return. Students should be prepared for class. However, I understand that for many reasons, some of them good ones, students cannot always be prepared. I have a higher regard for the occasional unprepared student than I have for no student at all. Once again - Come to class. From time to time students, for various reasons, will come to class late. For the sake of the class and your fellow students, not to mention the instructor, try to limit coming late to class to the bare minimum. A good goal to strive for is not to be late at all.

Examinations: There will be two examinations. The midterm will be worth 30% of your final grade and the final exam will be worth 35% of your final grade. Examinations will generally consist of multiple choice and short answer questions covering class reading assignments, lecture, and discussion topics. Any student that does not achieve a “C” or better grade on the midterm examination is required to schedule an appointment with me.
Citizenship Project or term paper: You have a choice between doing a "citizenship project" or a term paper. Either is worth 20% of your grade. The project involves student observation and/or participation in a public activity." The activity you research and select must have something to do with government or politics at the federal, state, or local level. For instance, students might choose to visit Congress and watch part of a session of Congress or attend a meeting of a congressional committee. A visit to your congressional representative's office on Capitol Hill, or to his or her local office, would also be acceptable so long as you speak with an official representative or one or more of his or her legislative assistants. A visit to the office of your state senator or delegate is equally acceptable. Likewise, a visit to the office of your county government representative is also acceptable. Bear in mind that if you choose to visit the office of one of your representatives, you should be prepared to ask him or his or her staffers some pertinent questions. A visit to your state or local government to watch it in session is also acceptable. You can make the project more significant if you also schedule a meeting with a member of your local government. Visit the Supreme Court. Use your imagination. There are a lot of different things you can do. Sit in on a meeting of your local school board. Listen to the issues being discussed. What position is your local school board representative taking? How is he or she going to vote on the issue(s) being discussed? Do you agree with your representative's position? If you wish to do a "term paper" in lieu of the citizenship project then submit an outline of what you wish to do to me for approval. I will provide additional information on the project or paper during the first weeks in class.

The Republicans and the Democrats maintain active political offices in your county or city. They have regular meetings to discuss local politics, coordinate fund raising, select candidates, run election campaigns and conduct other business. An acceptable project could involve a visit to your local Democratic or Republican headquarters to sit in on a meeting and to talk with one or more of the local party leaders about local issues after the meeting. There is much you can do with this type of assignment. Use your imagination. Use the Internet to explore possibilities. You can e-mail or call your representatives to check on the best times to come by their offices for a visit or for other information. Every representative has a web site with information on how to contact his or her office. It is not always easy to see a representative, especially at the federal level. However, many students in the past have secured appointments with their congressmen or congresswomen for interviews. Many others have visited Congress and spoken with staffers or legislative assistants. In the past, students taking this course have interviewed Strom Thurmond, Senator Zell Miller, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Congressman Tom Davis and others. The sky is the limit. "Go for it!"

How to do the project:

a. Selection. Identify the government activity of your choice and when and where you can attend it.
b. Background. Give some background on the selected activity. For instance, if you select the local school board, explain what its mission is, how it is constituted, how many members it has, and the primary current issues it is concerned with.
c. Observation. Describe what you observed. Was the session of a routine nature or was it contentious? Did the board reach any decisions? How do meetings start and end? Did board members have to compromise to reach a decision?
d. Analysis. Analyze what you observed. Why do you think the issue being discussed was an “issue” to begin with? Did board members appear to take positions according to party line? Did certain members seem to have their own agendas? How so? Did citizens attending the meeting make comments? Break your paper up into three equally weighted sections - Background, Observation, and Analysis. You must identify your topic and hand in a short, not to exceed, one page outline of what you intend to do to for instructor approval not later than 26 September 2017.

The project or paper should be typed, double-spaced and between six to eight pages with normal margins and appropriate citations. If you wish to expand the paper beyond the required eight pages, you may do so. However, fifty-five to sixty students are expected in this class. Try not to be too expansive.

The completed project is due on 14 November 2017. Don’t let this requirement catch up to you. Begin work now. You can be brilliant at everything in this course but if you do not do this project you may not pass this course. You can expect to have your paper and grade back by 28 November. Try not to miss the due date on this project. And if you do miss the due date you should be prepared with a very, very good reason. And the later you hand the paper in the more the chance that you will receive an “Incomplete” grade for the course as there may not be time to grade your paper until after the final exam. Please be punctual.
Office Hours: Generally, I will be available to speak with students and answer questions at the end of each class. I am prepared to stay as long as necessary. Otherwise, any student can schedule a meeting by speaking with me during a break or after class. Remember, it is my job to assist you to attain your full potential and to earn the grade you work for and deserve. Do not hesitate to arrange an appointment with me. I am here to help. I want to help. Students who have questions should feel free to communicate with me by e-mail.


Please ensure you obtain the required text as soon as possible if you do not already have it. It is essential for success in class. Be sure to compete each reading assignment before class. GOVT8 is the only text. However, students are responsible for reading pertinent daily articles, particularly on the day before and day of class, on government and government-related issues in a daily newspaper such as the Washington Post or the Washington Times. Reading other daily newspapers such as the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal or the Christian Science Monitor is also acceptable. Current events, as they relate to government will be an important part of this course. Newspapers are available at the library.

Special Needs: Students with special needs are requested to make the instructor aware of those needs during the first week of the course. Ten minutes prior to the midterm is not a good time to make me aware of any special needs requirements.

Honor Code: George Mason University students are bound by an honor code that requires all student work to be individual. This includes doing your own work on tests and required papers. See your student handbook for details. Students may use the university writing center for assistance with the technical aspects of their citizenship projects. If you are not a "good" writer and all of you who are not "good" writers know that you are not then use the Writing Center. It will help you to become a better communicator and it will improve your grade.

Grading Scale:

A (95-100)  B+ (86-89)  C+ (75-79)  D (60-69)  F (59 or less)
A- (90-94)  B (83-85)  C (70-74)
B- (80-82)

Recap of Course Requirements and weight assigned to each category:

1. Midterm Exam  30%
2. Final Exam  35%
3. Citizenship Project/paper  20%
4. Class Participation  15%

Total:  100%

Lectures, Assignments and Examinations:

29 August: Introduction and orientation to Government 103. Assignment Due: None.

5 September: Lecture: The origins and purposes of government. Different forms of government. Democracy and 'American' Democracy. We will also discuss the Constitution and its significance in American government. Assignment Due: Read Chapters 1 and 2, text. Appropriate newspaper articles. Also read Appendix A (Declaration of Independence) and Appendix B (The Constitution of the US).
12 September: Lecture: Federalism in America, its origins and evolution over time. States' rights and the Civil War. Discussion topics will include advantages and disadvantages of federalism and continuing rivalry between national and state government. Assignment Due: Chapter 3, text and relevant articles from a daily newspaper. Citizenship Project Outlines or outline for term paper is due today.

19 September: Lecture: Civil liberties in America and the basic "freedoms" (religion, speech, assembly, etc.) Discussion topics will include the rights of defendants and cruel and unusual punishment. Assignment Due: Text, Chapter 4 and relevant newspaper articles.

26 September: Lecture: Civil Rights: Short overview of African-American history and the history of other minorities in America. Civil rights issues regarding older Americans, women, and the LGBT community. Assignment due: Chapter 5, text and relevant newspaper articles. Outlines for the project are due today.

Review for midterm.

3 October: Midterm Exam. Study chapters one thru five.

10 October: Columbus Day break. Tuesday classes do not meet. Use your time wisely.

17 October: Lecture: Interest groups and their impact in American politics. Assignment Due: Chapter 6, text, relevant newspaper articles.

24 October: Political Parties We will discuss the major political parties, the significance of third party candidates and the recent general election. Assignment due: Read chapter 7, text and relevant newspaper articles.

31 October: Lecture: Public opinion and voting. We will discuss the significance of public opinion in a democracy and the utility of polls. We will also examine voter turnout and the implications of low rates of voting in America. Assignment Due: Chapter 8, text, newspaper articles.

7 November: Political campaigns and elections in America at the national, state and local levels. How candidates are selected and how the modern political campaign is run. PACs and campaign financing. Discussion of the possible disenfranchisement of minority voters in previous elections and in 2016. Assignment Due: Chapter 9, text and relevant newspaper articles.

14 November: Lecture: Politics and the media and the Congress. Impact of TV and radio on politicians and politics. The US Congress, its origin, structure and makeup, gerrymandering, term limits and other issues. Assignment Due: Chapters 10 and 11, text and relevant newspaper articles. Government Project is due today.

28 November: Lecture: The presidency. The powers and roles of the president. Organization of the Executive Branch. Discussion of the opportunities and difficulties confronting the former Obama administration and the current Trump administration. The bureaucracy, its organization and mission and how bureaucrats are appointed. Discussion of the Trump cabinet and the "Plum Book." Assignment: Chapters 12 and 13 and relevant newspaper articles. Projects and papers are due today.

5 December: Lecture: The judiciary and foreign policy. Assignment Due: Read Chapters 14 and 16 and pertinent articles in the newspaper. Review for final exam.

19 December: FINAL EXAM at 7:30 p.m. in our usual classroom. Good luck. Have a safe and happy Christmas/Holiday season. For those seniors graduating - congratulations. For those of you coming back in the spring - we look forward to having you as our students.