

Grande Prairie Regional College
Political Studies 1020
Introduction to Political Institutions, Processes and Problems
Winter 2009
University Transfer
(AU, UA, UC, UL, KUC)

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Office hours: W 1 - 2 p.m./Th. 1:45 - 3:15 p.m. and by appointment

Room: E306A

Time: M,W 14:30-15:50

College Calendar course description:

This course is an introduction to the institutions, processes and problems of government emphasizing Canadian and other democratic governments. The course includes discussions of law, constitutions, civil liberties, public opinion, voting behaviors, electoral systems, political parties, interest groups, federalism and nationalism. This course offers an introduction to different fields of political study. Problems to be examined may include: political integration, the right to national self-determination, humanitarian intervention, globalization, global warming, terrorism and other issues.

Course description, winter term 2009:

How democratic is our political system? How democratic should it be? To answer these questions we need to address further questions. What is the role of individual citizens and the people collectively? What can they do? What do they have rights and responsibilities to do? What are the powers and responsibilities of various occupants of political office, including representatives, heads of governments and others? How can and should they be held accountable - for decisions on the economy, fighting terrorism, going to war and other matters?

This course is designed to introduce you to political institutions and processes, primarily through a comparison of Canadian and American political systems. How similar are they? How significant are the differences? What are their best features? What reforms should be considered? Do the two systems measure up to appropriate standards of democracy?

Among the political problems to be examined are: the possible need for reform of the electoral system, the need to balance security and rights, the justifiability of torture and ways to control its use, the role of the courts in making decisions about political issues such as the death penalty, the definition of marriage, the legality of marijuana use and other matters, and changes that may be made to the Canadian and American health care systems.

Course objectives:

By the end of this course you should be able to define key terms, explain major functions of various components of political systems, and think critically

about the performance of the systems. You should be better able to compare, contrast, scrutinize, analyze, question, argue and think clearly and independently about political players and political systems. You should leave with basic knowledge to utilize as a citizen - and as a student when pursuing further academic study of politics.

Course requirements:

Short test on Part I.....	10%
Midterm exam.....	25%
Term paper.....	30%
Final exam.....	35%

Conversion table:

A+ 90 - 100	B+ 76 - 79	C+ 67 - 69	D+ 55 - 59
A 85 - 89	B 73 - 75	C 64 - 66	D 50 - 54
A- 80 - 84	B- 70 - 72	C- 60 - 63	F 0 - 49

For conversion of letter grades to the four-point scale see Calendar p. 41.

You are expected to reference sources fully and properly for your term paper. An instructor’s handout will provide assistance. See College Calendar, pp. 48-50, for information on the range of penalties for cheating and plagiarism.

The date of the final exam will be scheduled by the College. You are required to write the exam on that date. Take this into account when making any plans.

Students who miss an excessive number of classes may be denied the opportunity to write the final exam, as stated in the Calendar on p. 44.

For information on key dates and other important matters, see the Calendar as well.

Required Readings:

1. Mark Dickerson & Thomas Flanagan, An Introduction to Government and Politics: A Conceptual Approach, 7th edition. Scarborough: Ontario: ITP Nelson, 2006.
2. Selected database and internet readings as well as Blackboard postings.

Topics

I. Introduction.

- A. What is politics - the good and the bad. What is Political Science? The value of a liberal arts education.
- B. The political process. Branches of government. Democracy. Liberal democracy. Representative democracy.

II. Elections and Election-related topics

- A. The selection of executives and legislatures in Canada and the United States. The Single-Member Plurality System
- B. Proportional Representation and other electoral systems
- C. Political parties. Functions. Philosophies. Kinds of parties and party systems. Partisanship and bi-partisanship or post-partisanship.
- D. Elections. Functions. Voting behaviour. Voter turnout. Measures to address low voter turnout.
- E. News media. Functions. Leanings. Election coverage. Is there too much focus on personalities and scandals and not enough attention to positions on issues?

III. Government institutions and political processes

- A. Political culture. Canadian and American attitudes compared - on the role of government in society, equality, war, religion and other matters.
- B. Parliamentary vs. presidential systems. Party voting. Checks on power. Effectiveness. Accountability.
- C. The executive branch. Functions. Are the Canadian and Americans heads of government too powerful? Do their actions to combat terrorism unduly threaten civil rights?
- D. Torture. Is it immoral or useful? Should its use be legalized and regulated?
- E. Legislatures. Functions. Different views on the role of the representative
- F. Bureaucracies. Impartiality, fairness, efficiency and accountability
- G. Local government. Responsibilities and issues. Organization. Voter turnout and political parties.
- H. The courts and rights. Selection of judges. The American Bill of Rights, The Canadian Charter of Rights. Issues such as the death penalty, private health care, same-sex marriage...
- I. Interest groups. Functions. Methods. Determinants of Success. Ideological interest groups. Think tanks.
- J. Health care. Why do Canada and the United States have different health care systems? How should they be reformed?

IV. Nations and nationalism. Federalism. Democracy and the right to national self-determination.

- A. Sovereignty and sovereignty options - unitary, federal and confederal arrangements
- B. The cases of the Quebecois, Aboriginal Peoples and others.