

Virginia Community College Course Content Summary

Course Title: PLS 135: U.S. Government and Politics

Course Description

Teaches the political structure, processes, institutions, and policymaking of the US national government. Focuses on the three branches of government, their interrelationships, and how they shape policy. Addresses federalism; civil liberties and civil rights; political socialization and participation; public opinion, the media; interest groups; political parties; elections; and policymaking. The assignments in the course require college-level reading fluency and coherent communication through written reports. This is a Passport Transfer course. Lecture 3 hours. 3 credits.

General Course Purpose

To enable students to demonstrate a well-rounded knowledge of American government and politics; demonstrate an understanding of how political scientists analyze and interpret the foundations, institutions, processes, and actors that constitute American government and politics; and, demonstrate critical thought about American government and politics.

Course Prerequisites/Corequisites

None.

Course Objectives

Upon completing the course, the student will be able to:

Civic Engagement

- Explain the importance of citizen engagement, ways Americans can influence and become engaged in government, and factors that might affect people's willingness to become engaged in government.

Critical Thinking

- Differentiate between the concepts of democracy, direct and representative democracy, and several of the philosophical concepts that contributed to the development of U. S. democracy.
- Describe the origin and history of the U. S. Constitution and how the Constitution has adapted to our changing society.
- Explain the concept of Federalism and how the distribution of power between the national and state governments affords possibilities for conflict or cooperation.
- Describe the application of civil liberties and the central role of the Supreme Court in its interpretation of these rights.
- Describe the application of civil rights and the central role of the Supreme Court in its interpretation of these rights.
- Identify/discuss individual and group participation in government and why such participation is vital to a free political system.
- Identify/discuss how public officials, the media, and interest groups compete for setting the political or public agenda.
- Describe the structure and function of the three branches of American Government.
- Explain the influence of the bureaucracy on American politics.
- Explain the policy and budget-making processes.
- Explain ideologies underlying U.S. foreign policies throughout history.
- Compose a major essay, using peer-reviewed sources, critically evaluating a contemporary political issue being debated in America differentiating various points of view, and proposing an equitable resolution.

Professional Readiness

- Participate in collaborative assignments and presentations in the classroom or online.
- Adhere to classroom attendance and behavior requirements.
- Timely submission of assignments.

- Identify career opportunities within the federal government.

Quantitative Literacy

- Interpret and communicate quantitative information using language appropriate to the context and intended audience.
- Use appropriate quantitative methods to analyze voter turnout data; generally, assess polling information; and assess budget goals and proposals vs. costs and actual spending.
- Read and interpret graphs and descriptive statistics.
- Analyze how political and economic trends influence public policy, using demographic information and other data sources.

Scientific Literacy

- Describe the role of Enlightenment philosophers and their use of scientific reasoning in proposing political theories as well as their influence on the core values of American political thought.

Written Communication

- Compose a major essay and/or multiple smaller essays, using peer-reviewed sources, critically evaluating a contemporary political issue being debated in America differentiating various points of view, and proposing an equitable resolution.
- Written short essays addressing the topics addressed in the Critical Thinking section.

American Government and Civic Engagement

- Explain what the government is and why it is necessary.
- Identify the type of government in the U.S. compared to other government types.
- Describe pluralist theory, elite theory, and the pluralism-elitism debate.
- Explain the importance of citizen engagement in a democracy and various methods of engagement.

Constitution and its Origins

- Identify pre-US philosophical theories and ideas that influenced the Founders and the creation of the US Constitution, including relevant ancient and Enlightenment ideas.
- Explain Revolutionary ideas and actions that led to the Articles of Confederation and US Constitution.
- Identify US Constitutional structure and ratification process and arguments on its path to becoming the supreme law of the land.
- Consider the major controversies that have come from the Constitution and the creation of the US Bill of Rights.

Federalism

- Explain the concept of federalism.
- Describe how federalism has evolved in the United States.
- Compare different conceptions of federalism.
- Explain how federal intergovernmental grants have evolved.
- Identify the types of federal intergovernmental grants.
- Discuss the advantages of federalism.
- Explain the disadvantages and controversies of federalism.

Civil Liberties

- Define civil liberties and civil rights.
- Describe the development of civil liberties in the U.S. context and the conflicts that have been involved.

Civil Rights

- Define the concept of civil rights.

- Discuss the development of relevant concepts and controversies through American history, and the roles that various institutions and actors have played in this history.
- Consider the efforts of various groups to appeal for recognition of equality in America.

Public Opinion and Political Socialization

- Define public opinion and political socialization.
- Explain the process and role of political socialization in the U.S. political system.
- Compare how citizens learn political information.
- Explain how information about public opinion is gathered.
- Identify factors that change public opinion.
- Compare levels of public support for the branches of government.

Voting and Elections

- Consider the factors that influence Americans to vote as they do or why they chose not to.
- Describe important processes and terms in the process of electoral campaigns.

The Media

- Explain what the media are and how they are organized.
- Describe the main functions of the media in a free society.
- Compare different media formats and their respective audiences.
- Discuss the history of major media formats.
- Consider various controversies that surround the media today.

Political Parties

- Describe political parties and what they do.
- Explain the development of the two-party system in America.
- Consider the issues and controversies that surround the current party environment.

Interest Groups and Lobbying

- Explain how interest groups differ from political parties.
- Evaluate the different types of interests and what they do.
- Discuss the important terms associated with interest groups, including various theories on how they influence the policy process, and the differences citizens have in access to interest groups and the entities they try to influence.

Congress

- Describe the role of Congress in the U.S. constitutional system.
- Define bicameralism.
- Explain apportionment and related controversies.
- Discuss representation.
- Explain legislative leadership and the role of parties in Congress.
- Analyze the legislative process.

The Presidency

- Explain the formal and informal powers presidents bring to their roles in American government and how these powers and roles developed over time.
- Consider unique and controversial aspects of presidential elections.

The Bureaucracy

- Define bureaucracy and bureaucrat.
- Describe the evolution and growth of public administration in the United States.
- Explain the relationship of the bureaucracy to other government entities.

The Courts

- Explain the role of the judiciary in the US Constitution and how it has evolved.
- Describe the federal court system and the path(s) of cases through the courts.

Course Prefix and Number _____ (To be assigned by the VCCS)

- Discuss the US Supreme Court and the different theories that guide Court decision-making.

Domestic Policy

- Describe significant aspects of economic, welfare, and educational policies in the American federal system.
- Consider those entities of the American political system likely to be involved in these issues.

Foreign Policy

- Explain important concepts in US foreign and national security policy.
- Describe the government entities likely to play a dominant role in these policy areas.

Major Topics to be Included

American Government and Civic Engagement

Constitution and its Origins

Federalism

Civil Liberties

Civil Rights

Public Opinion and Political Socialization

Voting and Elections

The Media

Political Parties

Interest Groups and Lobbying

Congress

The Presidency

The Bureaucracy

The Courts

Domestic Policy

Foreign Policy