This course provides a very brief introduction to American political institutions and public policy. The course is intended for intelligent non-American masters-level students of public policy.

The course does not assume any prior familiarity with American political institutions, politics, history, personalities, or public policy. There are no grades. There are no required readings. However, active engaged thoughtful participation in seminar is expected. In that sense, the course is also an introduction to American-style graduate school.

The course consists of nine sessions with:

- Seven 50 minute lectures covering the basics of American government,
- One simulation introducing American elections in comparative perspective, and
- One discussion of important recent events in American politics (and, whatever else you wish to discuss). In 2019, the discussion will center on the rise of Trump and American ethno-nationalism.

The amount of material covered in the class is far more than can be absorbed in a compressed span, even by elite policy professionals. However, you will find that over time, the content of the course will come back to your mind and help you decipher the often bizarre and mysterious American political system, as you encounter it in other classes and professionally. At least, that is the goal.

To facilitate this, a copy of all the session slides and course materials have been placed for you on line, as well as a selection of graphs and data about many aspects of American life, politics, and policy. You may peruse these at your leisure.

If you are a non-native speaker of English, you may find it useful to print a copy of the slides so you can more easily attend to the instructor without simultaneously having to read the projected slides. Trying to do both simultaneously can be quite tedious in a foreign language.

Course Web Page

The slides, lecture notes, rules for the election simulation, useful/interesting charts and graphs, and an optional reading for Session Nine are available at:

https://scholar.princeton.edu/ccameron/intro

Course Organization & Schedule (Covid-19 Version)

Saturday 8/22/2020

10.00-10.50    Session 1: Introduction, Constitutional Design, Incentive Systems
11.00-11.50    Session 2: Congress
Lunch 12.00-1.00
1.00-1.50  Session 3: The President
2.00-2.50  Session 4: The Federal Civil Service

Sunday 8/23/2020
10.00-10.50  Session 5: U.S. Courts & Legal System
11.00-11.50  Session 6: The Elections Game: Understanding American Elections
11.00-11.50  Session 7: Non-state Actors & Policy Influence Activities
Lunch 12.00-1.00
1.00-1.50  Session 8: The Main Contours of American Public Policy
2.00-2.50  Session 9: The Rise of Trump/Unanswered Questions

Guide to Sessions

Session 1: Introduction/Constitution & Incentive Systems
You will learn:
  1) How the U.S. Constitution sets up the government
  2) How the U.S. constitutional design differs from a parliamentary system
  3) The logic behind the separation-of-powers design
  4) The varieties of “checks and balances” built into the system
  5) The incentives for policy actors created by the constitutional design

Session 2: Congress
You will learn:
  1) Why Congress is so powerful – in theory
  2) How Congress is organized
  3) How a bill becomes a Law
  4) The extent of ideological polarization in Congress
  5) The consequences of ideological polarization
School House Rock: How a Bill Becomes a Law
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFroMQlKiag

Session 3: The President
You will learn:
  1) Why the president is constitutionally weak
  2) How presidents nonetheless create power
  3) The 5 jobs of the president
  4) The 6 tools presidents use in practice to perform the jobs

Session 4: The Federal Civil Service
You will learn:
  1) How the federal civil service is organized
  2) The four personnel policies that make the federal civil service unique
  3) The adverse consequences of the four policies
4) Possible reforms and barriers to reform

Session 5: U.S. Courts and the Legal System
You will learn:
1) How the U.S. legal system differs from a civil law system
2) How the federal judiciary is organized, and why
3) How state and federal courts divide their jobs
4) How courts force administrative agencies to obey the rule of law
5) Why the Supreme Court is limited in its ability to affect social change

Session 6: The Elections Game
You will learn:
1) Why candidates select particular policy platforms
2) Why there are only two effective parties in the US
3) What happens when candidate platforms are controlled by policy extremists

Rules for the party game

Session 7: Non-state Actors & Influence Activities
You will learn:
1) How the media has changed over time, and what the political consequences are
2) Why, for citizen knowledge of politics, “the mean is low but the variance is high”
3) Why the number of interest groups exploded in the 1970s, and what difference it makes
4) How firms have become political activists, but why that can be dangerous for them
5) How reform of political parties facilitated congressional polarization
6) How lobbying works

Real lobbyists at work
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvfr3KVcME&t=275s

Session 8: American Public Policy
You will learn:
1) How and why the US government grew over time
2) Why the federal government is “an insurance company with an army”
3) Where the federal government gets its money
4) How and why the federal government is a “hidden state”

Session 9: The Rise of Trump: Immigration & Ethno-nationalism
We will discuss the Trump phenomenon. Also, this is a chance for you to discuss anything else about bizarre America that you are curious about.

Optional Reading