American Politics (Fall 2024)

SOSC3000I
3 Credits
No pre-requisites

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Course Description

This course provides an advanced overview of American politics and government. Course material is divided into three broad sections. The first section briefly covers the historical, philosophical, and constitutional foundations of the United States. The second section examines the major American formal governing institutions (e.g., the presidency, the Congress, the courts, and the bureaucracy) and organizations (e.g., political parties). The third section covers mass and elite political behavior and contemporary political issues. Throughout the course, there will be a strong focus on relating the modern American political environment to the country's founding principles and philosophies, as well the historical development that led to the current status quo. Most topics will be covered using both lectures and in-class discussions and activities.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:
1. Describe the structure of the United States Constitution.
2. Explain the formal law/policy-making process at the national level of the United States.
3. Identify and describe the basic structure of the major formal governing institutions of the United States.
4. Explain the role of mass and elite political behavior in the policymaking and leader selection process.
5. Apply their understanding of formal decision-making processes and norms of political behavior to contemporary political issues.

Assessment and Grading

This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Detailed rubrics for each assignment are provided below, outlining the criteria used for evaluation.

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Foundations Exam	20%	October 3
Institutions Exam	20%	November 7

Election Analysis Group Presentation	15%	November 28	
Election Analysis Individual Essay	20%	During exam period	
Class Participation	15%		
Attendance	10%		

* Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be released within two weeks of the due date.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Foundations Exam	ILO1, ILO2	One week after completing the Foundations section, students will take an in-class exam covering all of the material for that section. The exam will be a mixture of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short written answers.
Institutions Exam	ILO2, ILO3	One week after completing the Institutions section, students will take an in-class exam covering all of the material for that section. The exam will be a mixture of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short written answers.
2024 is a Presidential election year in the United States. In November, the Presidency, all seats in the House of Representatives, and about one-third of seats in the Senate will be filled by an election on a constitutionally mandated schedule. Students will complete a two-part project focused on the campaign and election results of a congressional race and the presidential race within a particular congressional district assigned by the instructor. The two parts of the project are as follows:		
Election Analysis Group Presentation	ILO4, ILO5	On the final day of class, student groups will deliver a presentation that details what happened in their assigned congressional district. The material presented is expected to be largely descriptive, focusing on the characteristics of the candidates, the characteristics of the voters, the issues of the campaign, and details about the election itself in terms of voter turnout, election results, and demographic breakdowns. More details will be provided in class.
Election Analysis Individual Essay	ILO4, ILO5	About two weeks after the final class session, students will submit an individual essay of 6–8 double-spaced pages that describes and analyzes what happened in their assigned congressional district. The student writing for the individual assignment is expected to be far more analytical than the group presentation, drawing upon materials from the lectures and the readings to place the campaign

		and the election result in the broader context of the American political system. In other words, the individual essays will focus not only on what happened, but also why, and how it relates to the broader historical and cultural political context. More details will be provided in class.
Attendance	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3, ILO4, ILO5	Attendance is required. After the drop/add period, students can miss two class sessions for any reason without penalty. Any additional absences will only be exempted with a valid excuse backed up by documentation.

Grading Rubrics

Exams
- The number of points assigned to each question will be given to the students.
- Answers to multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions will generally be considered correct and receive full credit, or incorrect and receive no credit.
- Short written answers will follow a specific model answer drawn from course material. Markers will be encouraged to grant partial credit, where possible.

Election Analysis Group Presentation
Students will be assigned to a group of other students and asked to present on the details of the 2024 presidential race and a congressional race within an assigned congressional district.
- Marking distinctions will be based on the following criteria:
    - A: Demonstrates clear and correct descriptions of the issues of the congressional race and demographic analysis of the election results of both the congressional race and the presidential race. Some analysis of party politics is applied to the results, drawing on material from the course.
    - B: Some of the issues discussed for an A-mark are present, but not others; explanations presented are sufficiently clear and correct. Some analysis of party politics is applied, drawing on material from the course.
    - C: Some of the issues discussed for an A-mark are present, but not others; explanations may be lacking in clarity or precision. Minimal analysis of party politics is applied.
    - D: Presentation is lacking in clear and correct description of the facts of the presidential and congressional races. Minimal analysis of party politics is applied.
    - F: Presentation is lacking in clear and correct description of the facts of the presidential and congressional races. No analysis of party politics is applied.
- Students will be asked to evaluate the work of fellow group members. This information will be incorporated into individual students marks after due diligence if problems are identified.

Election Analysis Individual Essay
With respect to the same assigned congressional district used for the group presentation, students will be asked to write an individual essay in which they reiterate some of the descriptive material from the group presentation, but add further analysis and argument for why the results and campaign dynamics occurred as they did.

- Marking distinctions will be based on the following criteria:
    - A: Demonstrates clear and correct descriptions of the issues of the congressional race and demographic analysis of the election results of both the congressional race and the presidential race. Analysis of party politics is applied to the results, drawing on material from the course. An original argument is introduced, drawing on course material, for why the results and campaign dynamics occurred as they did, and that argument is sufficiently clear.
    - B: Some of the issues discussed for an A-mark are present, but not others; explanations presented are sufficiently clear and correct. Some analysis of party politics is applied, drawing on material from the course. An original argument for why the results and campaign dynamics occurred as they did; argument needs improvement in clarity.
    - C: Some of the issues discussed for an A-mark are present, but not others; explanations may be lacking in clarity or precision. Minimal analysis of party politics is applied. Some analysis of party politics is applied, drawing on material from the course. An original argument for why the results and campaign dynamics occurred as they did; argument needs improvement in clarity.
    - D: Essay is lacking in clear and correct description of the facts of the presidential and congressional races. Minimal analysis of party politics is applied. Minimal original argument is presented.
    - F: Essay is lacking in clear and correct description of the facts of the presidential and congressional races. No analysis of party politics is applied and/or no original argument is presented

Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	[Example: Demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of subject matter, expertise in problem-solving, and significant creativity in thinking. Exhibits a high capacity for scholarship and collaboration, going beyond core requirements to achieve learning goals.]
B	Good Performance	[Example: Shows good knowledge and understanding of the main subject matter, competence in problem-solving, and the ability to analyze and evaluate issues. Displays high motivation to learn and the ability to work effectively with others.]
C	Satisfactory Performance	[Example: Possesses adequate knowledge of core subject matter, competence in dealing with familiar problems, and some capacity for analysis and critical thinking. Shows persistence and effort to achieve broadly defined learning goals.]
D	Marginal Pass	[Example: Has threshold knowledge of core subject matter, potential to achieve key professional skills, and the ability to make basic judgments. Benefits from the course and has the potential to develop in the discipline.]
F	Fail	[Example: Demonstrates insufficient understanding of the subject matter and lacks the necessary problem-solving skills. Shows limited ability to think critically or analytically and exhibits minimal effort towards achieving learning goals. Does not meet the threshold requirements for professional practice or development in the discipline.]

Course AI Policy

The use of generative AI is permitted. Students are particularly discouraged from over-reliance on generative AI for the generation of original ideas. Students are particularly encouraged to use generative AI to assist with editing English prose.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on exams will include suggested correct answers and a report on overall student performance, including any adjustments made. Feedback on presentations and final papers will include feedback about strengths and areas for improvement. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Required Texts and Materials

Required readings should be completed prior to the date they are listed on the schedule. All readings will be provided through Canvas. There is no text that is perfect for this course, and therefore there is no text that students are required to purchase. However, the following book is highly recommended:

- Kollman, Ken. 2019. *The American Political System*, Third Core Edition. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.