

Course Syllabus

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PS 2305 – 003

Introductory American Government

Fall 2026

08/24 – 12/03

Tuesdays and Thursdays - 9:30AM - 10:50PM

WTB 236

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This syllabus provides the general plan for the course. Adjustments may be made as the semester develops. Any changes will be announced in class and/or through Canvas.

Introduction

American government is often taught as a collection of things to memorize: three branches, federalism, elections, political parties, court cases, constitutional amendments, and public policies.

We are going to study those things, but our larger goal is to understand **how they work together as a system**.

Throughout the semester, we will investigate American politics through a recurring framework:

PEOPLE → RULES → RESOURCES → INCENTIVES → POWER = OUTCOMES → FEEDBACK → CHANGE

Political outcomes happen because people bring different interests, experiences, and values into political life. Institutions establish rules. Rules create incentives and constraints. Political actors make choices within those environments. Those choices produce outcomes that distribute power, opportunities, benefits, and costs. Those outcomes then shape what people believe and what they demand next.

That means we will ask:

Who wanted what? What rules shaped their choices? What incentives influenced their behavior? Who had power? What resulted? Who benefited or paid the costs? What feedback did those outcomes create? What would have to change to produce a different result?

Conflict remains central to American politics. The Constitution, federalism, civil rights and liberties, Congress, the presidency, courts, bureaucracy, political parties, elections, public opinion, media, interest groups, and public policy all provide different arenas in which that conflict occurs.

By the end of the semester, the goal is not simply to know more facts about American government.

The goal is to become better at **investigating how our political system works.**

HOW WE WILL LEARN: SSS Approach

This course uses three recurring approaches to move beyond simply reading or hearing about American government:

SCREENINGS

Film Labs use documentaries and other media to connect political concepts to lived experiences, historical events, institutions, and conflicts.

You will be asked to identify moments that reveal something about **how power works**, connect those moments to concepts from the course, and consider how different institutional arrangements might produce different outcomes.

SIMULATIONS

Simulations, games, negotiations, and decision-making exercises put you inside political institutions. Rather than simply being told that institutions create incentives and constraints, you will experience what happens when you must make decisions while operating under them.

The questions become: **what would you do? What does the system make easier, harder, rewarding, or costly to do?**

STORYTELLING

Understanding something and explaining it are different skills.

Throughout the course, you will practice communicating political ideas through discussion, reflection, written analysis, video and voice memos, and other public-facing work.

The goal is to explain complicated political processes clearly and responsibly to people beyond the classroom.

Course Objectives

Upon successful completion of this course, students should be able to:

- 1. **Explain the basic structure of American government**, including constitutionalism, federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances, and the relationships among national, state, and local governments.
- 2. **Describe the roles and powers of major political institutions**, including Congress, the presidency, judiciary, and bureaucracy.
- 3. **Distinguish civil liberties from civil rights** and explain how constitutional principles, political institutions, and social movements have shaped their development.
- 4. **Explain how citizens interact with the political system** through elections, political parties, interest groups, public opinion, media, and other forms of political participation.
- 5. **Analyze political outcomes using a systems approach**, identifying the people, values, institutions, rules, incentives, decisions, and feedback involved.
- 6. **Evaluate how political institutions distribute power, opportunities, benefits, and costs** among different groups and interests.
- 7. **Recognize political tradeoffs** and explain why reasonable people may favor different institutional arrangements or policy outcomes.
- 8. **Use evidence to evaluate political claims** and distinguish analysis from assumption, misinformation, and unsupported opinion.
- 9. **Communicate political ideas clearly** through discussion, written work, simulations, reflection, and public-facing storytelling.
- 10. **Consider institutional change**, asking not only whether a political outcome is desirable, but what rules, incentives, relationships, or institutions would have to change to produce a different outcome.

Grade

Assignment	Percentage
Quizzes	25%
Discussion & Participation	15%
Film Labs & Final Portfolio	20%
Midterm Exam	20%
Final Exam	20%

	Assignment	Percentage
TOTAL		100%

Quizzes

Quizzes are designed primarily to assess whether you understand the foundational concepts, institutions, vocabulary, and relationships necessary to perform the deeper analysis we will do in class.

Attendance

This course meets twice each week and relies heavily on activities that cannot always be recreated outside the classroom. Attendance matters. Your incentive is **the full learning experience**. But I'm not going to police that. Y'all are grown.

If you're going to miss class, you are responsible for checking Canvas, obtaining relevant notes or materials, and **completing work** that can reasonably be completed outside class.

If circumstances begin interfering substantially with your ability to attend or complete the course, **communicate with me early rather than waiting until the end of the semester**. There are often more options available when problems are addressed while they are happening.

Discussion & Participation

This is a course about politics, institutions, disagreement, power, and collective decision-making. Those subjects are better understood through active engagement than passive observation.

Participation may include whole-class discussion, small-group exercises, polling, brief written reflections, simulations, collaborative problem-solving, and other in-class activities.

Participation is evaluated on **meaningful engagement**, not on having the loudest voice or holding a particular political viewpoint.

You are not graded on whether I agree with you.

You are expected to engage seriously with evidence, course concepts, your classmates, and competing interpretations.

Film Labs & Final Portfolio

During the semester, we will hold **five Film Labs**.

Each screening is a **political case study**. You will use films to examine how individuals experience institutions, how power operates, how rules and incentives shape behavior, and how political outcomes

affect people's lives.

For each Film Lab, you will complete screening notes organized around four questions:

1. **What's a moment that revealed something important about how power works?**
2. **How does the system connect the moment to institutions, rules, incentives, values, or other concepts studied in class.**
3. **What caused you to reconsider, question, or understand differently?**
4. **What would redesign require?**

Final Portfolio

Your final Film Lab submission will bring your work from across the semester together.

The portfolio will include:

- Your clearly identified screening notes from all five Film Labs; and
- **A 2–5 minute short-form video memo: “What I've Learned About Power, by Design.”**

The video should synthesize what the screenings and course have helped you understand about how American political systems distribute power and produce outcomes.

Additional instructions and grading criteria will be provided through Canvas.

Midterm & Final Exams

The Midterm and Final Exams assess your understanding of the major concepts, institutions, relationships, and arguments covered in the course.

Questions may ask you to do more than identify a definition. You should be prepared to **recognize relationships, apply concepts, distinguish between similar ideas, and explain how parts of the political system interact.**

The Final Exam will emphasize material covered after the Midterm unless otherwise announced.

Note - If an emergency or serious circumstance prevents you from taking an exam as scheduled, contact me as soon as reasonably possible.

Make-up exams are not automatic and may require appropriate documentation consistent with university policy. When a make-up exam is approved, its format may differ from the regularly scheduled exam and may include written-response or essay questions.

Situations involving university-sponsored activities, religious observances, disability accommodations, or other circumstances covered by university policy will be handled according to those policies.

Grade Assignment

Below 60 = F

60 and less than 70 = D

70 and less than 80 = C

80 and less than 90 = B

90 and less than 100 = A

Accommodations

Students who require academic accommodations should work with UT Tyler's **Student Accessibility and Resources (SAR)** office.

Approved accommodations will be implemented consistent with university policy and the essential requirements of the course.

Students are encouraged to communicate with me early in the semester so that we can ensure approved accommodations work effectively with exams, screenings, simulations, classroom activities, and other course requirements.

Information for Classroom

Politics involves disagreement. Productive disagreement requires an environment in which people can speak, listen, question assumptions, examine evidence, and change their minds.

You are not expected to agree with your classmates - or with me.

You **are** expected to treat other people as participants in a shared intellectual environment.

Challenge **ideas, evidence, assumptions, institutions, and arguments** rather than attacking the people expressing them.

Some course material will address controversial political, social, historical, and constitutional questions. Encountering an argument in class does not mean that you are being asked to endorse it. Our task is to understand political arguments and systems well enough to analyze them critically.

Recording of Class Sessions

Class sessions may occasionally be recorded by the instructor for legitimate educational purposes.

Recordings containing personally identifiable student information will be handled consistent with FERPA and applicable university policies. Course recordings and other course materials may not be reproduced, posted publicly, distributed, or shared outside the course without authorization.

Students who require recording as an approved accommodation should follow the procedures established by Student Accessibility and Resources.

Tech & Attention

Technology may be used for **course-related purposes** during class.

Texting, social media, unrelated browsing, watching videos, or other sustained off-task activity interferes not only with your learning but potentially with students around you.

I will generally treat occasional distraction as exactly that. Repeated behavior that disrupts the learning environment, however, may require correction or ejection.

There will also be times when I ask everyone to put devices away so that we can concentrate on a discussion, screening, simulation, or other activity.

Family Friendly Policy

Students sometimes balance college with responsibilities as parents and caregivers. Those responsibilities do not always conform neatly to a class schedule.

Babies who need to accompany a parent are welcome. Older children may also occasionally accompany a student when **unexpected gaps in childcare** occur. This policy is intended to help students manage occasional conflicts; it is not intended as a substitute for regular childcare.

When possible, students bringing children should choose a location that allows them to step outside temporarily if their child needs attention in a way that significantly disrupts class.

Most importantly, **communicate with me.**

Parenting, caregiving, employment, and education can create competing demands. I maintain the same academic standards for students while recognizing that there may be more than one reasonable way to help a student meet those standards.

Our classroom should respect the different responsibilities students carry with them when they enter it.

Adapted from Cheyney (2019).

A Note About Political Viewpoints

You do not need to share your political beliefs with me.

Nothing in this course requires you to adopt a particular ideological position, political identity, or policy preference.

Your grade is based on your ability to **understand concepts, evaluate evidence, construct arguments, make connections, and explain your reasoning**, not on whether your conclusions match

mine.

Political disagreement cannot always be reduced to one side knowing something the other side does not. People may disagree because they hold different values, experience institutions differently, respond to different incentives, prioritize different outcomes, or accept different political tradeoffs.

Our responsibility is to understand those differences before judging them.

To master the subjective, first master the objective.

Schedule

Refer to Canvas

UT Tyler Honor Code

Every member of the UT Tyler community joins together to embrace: Honor and integrity that will not allow me to lie, cheat, or steal, nor to accept the actions of those who do. Students Rights and Responsibilities To know and understand the policies that affect your rights and responsibilities as a student at UT Tyler, please follow this link: <http://www.uttyler.edu/wellness/rightsresponsibilities.php>
 <http://www.uttyler.edu/wellness/rightsresponsibilities.php>

Campus Carry

We respect the right and privacy of students 21 and over who are duly licensed to carry concealed weapons in this class. License holders are expected to behave responsibly and keep a handgun secure and concealed. More information is available at <http://www.uttyler.edu/about/campus-carry/index.php>  <http://www.uttyler.edu/about/campus-carry/index.php>

UT Tyler a Tobacco-Free University

All forms of tobacco will not be permitted on the UT Tyler main campus, branch campuses, and any property owned by UT Tyler. This applies to all members of the University community, including students, faculty, staff, University affiliates, contractors, and visitors. Forms of tobacco not permitted include cigarettes, cigars, pipes, water pipes (hookah), bidis, kreteks, electronic cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, snuff, chewing tobacco, and all other tobacco products. There are several cessation programs available to students looking to quit smoking, including counseling, quitlines, and group support. For more information on cessation programs please visit www.uttyler.edu/tobacco-free 
<http://www.uttyler.edu/tobacco-free>

Grade Replacement/Forgiveness and Census Date Policies

Students repeating a course for grade forgiveness (grade replacement) must file a Grade Replacement

Contract with the Enrollment Services Center (ADM 230) on or before the Census Date of the semester in which the course will be repeated. (For Fall, the Census Date is Sept. 12.) Grade Replacement Contracts are available in the Enrollment Services Center or at <http://www.uttyler.edu/registrar>. Each semester's Census Date can be found on the Contract itself, on the Academic Calendar, or in the information pamphlets published each semester by the Office of the Registrar. Failure to file a Grade Replacement Contract will result in both the original and repeated grade being used to calculate your overall grade point average. Undergraduates are eligible to exercise grade replacement for only three course repeats during their career at UT Tyler; graduates are eligible for two grade replacements. Full policy details are printed on each Grade Replacement Contract.

The Census Date (Sept. 12th) is the deadline for many forms and enrollment actions of which students need to be aware. These include:

- ☐ Submitting Grade Replacement Contracts, Transient Forms, requests to withhold directory information, approvals for taking courses as Audit, Pass/Fail or Credit/No Credit.
- ☐ Receiving 100% refunds for partial withdrawals. (There is no refund for these after the Census Date)
 - ☐ Schedule adjustments (section changes, adding a new class, dropping without a "W" grade)
 - ☐ Being reinstated or re-enrolled in classes after being dropped for non-payment
- ☐ Completing the process for tuition exemptions or waivers through Financial Aid State-Mandated Course

Drop Policy

Texas law prohibits a student who began college for the first time in Fall 2007 or thereafter from dropping more than six courses during their entire undergraduate career. This includes courses dropped at another 2-year or 4-year Texas public college or university. For purposes of this rule, a dropped course is any course that is dropped after the census date (See Academic Calendar for the specific date). Exceptions to the 6-drop rule may be found in the catalog. Petitions for exemptions must be submitted to the Enrollment Services Center and must be accompanied by documentation of the extenuating circumstance. Please contact the Enrollment Services Center if you have any questions.

Disability/Accessibility Services

In accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA) the University of Texas at Tyler offers accommodations to students with learning, physical and/or psychological disabilities. If you have a disability, including a non-visible diagnosis such as a learning disorder, chronic illness, TBI, PTSD, ADHD, or you have a history of modifications or accommodations in a previous educational environment, you are encouraged to visit <https://hood.accessiblelearning.com/UTTyler> and fill out the New Student application. The Student Accessibility and Resources (SAR) office will contact you when your application has been submitted and an appointment with Cynthia Lowery, Assistant Director of Student Services/ADA Coordinator. For more information, including filling out an application for services, please visit the SAR webpage at

<http://www.uttyler.edu/disabilityservices>, the SAR office located in the University Center, # 3150 or call 903.566.7079.

Student Absence due to Religious Observance

Students who anticipate being absent from class due to a religious observance are requested to inform the instructor of such absences by the second class meeting of the semester. (Revised 05/17)

Student Absence for University-Sponsored Events and Activities

If you intend to be absent for a university-sponsored event or activity, you (or the event sponsor) must notify the instructor at least two weeks prior to the date of the planned absence. At that time the instructor will set a date and time when make-up assignments will be completed.

Social Security and FERPA Statement

It is the policy of The University of Texas at Tyler to protect the confidential nature of social security numbers. The University has changed its computer programming so that all students have an identification number. The electronic transmission of grades (e.g., via e-mail) risks violation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act; grades will not be transmitted electronically.

Emergency Exits and Evacuation

Everyone is required to exit the building when a fire alarm goes off. Follow your instructor's directions regarding the appropriate exit. If you require assistance during an evacuation, inform your instructor in the first week of class. Do not re-enter the building unless given permission by University Police, Fire department, or Fire Prevention Services.

Student Standards of Academic Conduct

Disciplinary proceedings may be initiated against any student who engages in scholastic dishonesty, including, but not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, collusion, the submission for credit of any work or materials that are attributable in whole or in part to another person, taking an examination for another person, any act designed to give unfair advantage to a student or the attempt to commit such acts.

"Cheating" includes, but is not limited to:

- ☐ copying from another student's test paper;
- ☐ using, during a test, materials not authorized by the person giving the test;
- ☐ failure to comply with instructions given by the person administering the test;
- ☐ possession during a test of materials which are not authorized by the person giving the test, such as class notes or specifically designed "crib notes". The presence of textbooks constitutes a violation if they have been specifically prohibited by the person administering the test;
- ☐ using, buying, stealing, transporting, or soliciting in whole or part the contents of an unadministered test, test key, homework solution, or computer program;

- ☐ collaborating with or seeking aid from another student during a test or other assignment without authority;
- ☐ discussing the contents of an examination with another student who will take the examination;
- ☐ divulging the contents of an examination, for the purpose of preserving questions for use by another, when the instructors has designated that the examination is not to be removed from the examination room or not to be returned or to be kept by the student;
- ☐ substituting for another person, or permitting another person to substitute for oneself to take a course, a test, or any course-related assignment;
- ☐ paying or offering money or other valuable thing to, or coercing another person to obtain an unadministered test, test key, homework solution, or computer program or information about an unadministered test, test key, home solution or computer program;
- ☐ falsifying research data, laboratory reports, and/or other academic work offered for credit;
- ☐ taking, keeping, misplacing, or damaging the property of The University of Texas at Tyler, or of another, if the student knows or reasonably should know that an unfair academic advantage would be gained by such conduct; and
- ☐ misrepresenting facts, including providing false grades or resumes, for the purpose of obtaining an academic or financial benefit or injuring another student academically or financially.

“Plagiarism” includes, but is not limited to, the appropriation, buying, receiving as a gift, or obtaining by any means another’s work and the submission of it as one’s own academic work offered for credit. “Collusion” includes, but is not limited to, the unauthorized collaboration with another person in preparing academic assignments offered for credit or collaboration with another person to commit a violation of any section of the rules on scholastic dishonesty.

All written work that is submitted will be subject to review by plagiarism software.

UT Tyler Resources for Students

- ☐ UT Tyler Writing Center (903.565.5995), writingcenter@uttyler.edu
- ☐ UT Tyler Tutoring Center (903.565.5964), tutoring@uttyler.edu
- ☐ The Mathematics Learning Center, RBN 4021, this is the open access computer lab for math students, with tutors on duty to assist students who are enrolled in early-career courses.
 - ☐ UT Tyler Counseling Center (903.566.7254)



(<https://uttyler.instructure.com/enroll/MJWEMR>)

Course Summary:

Date	Details	Due
Thu Aug 27, 2026	 Syllabus and Assignment Review https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141247	due by 11:59pm
Sun Aug 30, 2026	 Federalism Discussion Question https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141231	due by 11:59pm
Sun Sep 6, 2026	 Congress Discussion Questions https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141230	due by 11:59pm
Thu Sep 10, 2026	 Quiz 1 https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141241	due by 11:59pm
Sun Sep 13, 2026	 The Presidency Discussion Questions https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141229	due by 11:59pm
Sun Sep 20, 2026	 The Judiciary Discussion Questions https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141228	due by 11:59pm
Thu Sep 24, 2026	 Quiz 2 https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141242	due by 11:59pm

Date	Details	Due
Sun Sep 27, 2026	 The Bureaucracy Discussion Questions (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141227)	due by 11:59pm
Sun Oct 4, 2026	 Political Parties Discussion Questions (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141226)	due by 11:59pm
Thu Oct 8, 2026	 Quiz 3 (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141243)	due by 11:59pm
Sun Oct 11, 2026	 Interest Group Discussion Question (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141225)	due by 11:59pm
	 Midterm Exam (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141240)	due by 11:59pm
Tue Oct 27, 2026	 Quiz 4 (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141244)	due by 11:59pm
Sun Nov 1, 2026	 Liberties, Rights, Freedoms & Equality Discussion Questions (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141224)	due by 11:59pm
Sun Nov 15, 2026	 The Media Discussion Questions (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141223)	due by 11:59pm
Sun Nov 22, 2026	 Public Opinion Discussion Questions (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141222)	due by 11:59pm
Sun Nov 29, 2026	 Quiz SIX (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141245)	due by 11pm
	 Balance Your Budget - Memo to the President (https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141219)	due by 11:59pm

Date	Details	Due
	 Public Policy Discussion Questions https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141221	due by 11:59pm
	 Final Exam https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141238	due by 11:59pm
Sun Dec 6, 2026	 Voting, Campaigns, and Elections Discussion Questions https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141220	due by 11:59pm
Wed Dec 9, 2026	 Final Portfolio https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141239	due by 11:59pm
	 Film Lab #1 https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141232	
	 Film Lab #2 https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141233	
	 Film Lab #3 https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141234	
	 Film Lab #4 https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141235	
	 Film Lab #5 https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141236	
	 Film Lab #6 https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141237	
	 Roll Call Attendance https://uttyler.instructure.com/courses/55262/assignments/1141246	