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Readings in American Politics

This course examines recent works on American politics in a seminar format. The topics covered by the books include, in order: American politics in comparative perspective, the rise of popular distrust of government, operations of Congress during the 1995 "Republican revolution," a psychological analysis of President Bill Clinton and the rise of "politics by other means" beyond elections to settle disputes in national government.

We will meet only on Tuesdays. Four of our sessions will involve student-managed discussions or projects. Each student-managed session concerns one of the assigned books. During the first week, each student must determine a rank-order preference of the books available for student-managed sessions. Submit that personal list to me by Friday, March 30. I will then select teams of students to handle the various book sessions. Your performance during the session that you manage constitutes 30 percent of your final grade. Additional advice regarding these sections occurs later in the syllabus.

Another 20 percent of your grade depends on your participation in other class discussions. By noon each Monday, you must submit a "PMI" list (plus or positive points, minus or negative points, and interesting points). More detail on doing a "PMI" occurs later in this syllabus.

Half of your grade depends upon a critical essay about two of the required readings. This essay is due at my office by NOON, Wednesday, May 31.

The following required books are available in the bookstore:

John Kingdon, AMERICA THE UNUSUAL

Joseph S. Nye, Philip D. Zelikow and David C. King, editors, WHY PEOPLE DON'T TRUST GOVERNMENT

Nicol C. Rae, CONSERVATIVE REFORMERS: THE REPUBLICAN FRESHMEN AND THE LESSONS OF THE 104TH CONGRESS

Stanley A. Renshon, HIGH HOPES: THE CLINTON PRESIDENCY AND THE POLITICS OF AMBITION

Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter, POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS: POLITICIANS, PROSECUTORS AND THE PRESS FROM WHITEWATER TO WATERGATE

In addition, multiple copies of each of these books are on closed reserve in the library.

What follows is a list of reading assignments.

1. Introduction
2. Kingdon, entire
3. Nye, et. al., introduction and chapters 3-7
4. Nye, et. al., chapters 2, 8, 9 and conclusion (STUDENT-MANAGED SESSION)
5. Rae, chapters 1-4
6. Rae, chapters 5-7 (STUDENT MANAGED SESSION)
7. Renshon, Foreword, Introduction and chapters 1-8

8. Renshon, chapters 9-14 and Appendix (STUDENT-MANAGED SESSION -- paper outlines due)
9. Ginsberg and Shefter, Preface and chapters 1-3
10. Ginsberg and Shefter, chapters 4-6 (STUDENT-MANAGED SESSION)

DOING A "PMI"

Each week, you must read the material and create a "PMI" analysis of its substance. The de Bono handout explains the PMI method. It is a useful tool for appraising the ideas you find in the readings. Your task is to evaluate the quality of the analysis in the reading. Keep a blank sheet of paper by you as you read. As you encounter them, list the positive, negative and interesting points in the author's analysis. The interesting points are not necessarily positive or negative, but lead to fruitful ways of thinking about the topics presented by the author. Each week, by Monday noon, a PMI list must be posted at that week's "thread" in our class internet caucus. The list should include at least two positive points, two negative points and two interesting points about the author's analysis. Each point can be a sentence to a paragraph in length. I will use your PMIs as the basis for class discussion the next day. Please also include a DISCUSSION QUESTION with each of your PMI points.

OPTIONS FOR STUDENT-MANAGED SESSIONS

Each of you will be part of a team charged with managing a 105 minutes session on a book. As a team, you can pursue a variety of formats. You could pose a PROBLEM for the class to solve arising from the reading. For example, you could discuss the psychological problems of the presidency (Renshon) and charge groups of students with proposing specific reforms to solve the problems. Another example might involve solving the problems of "politics by other means" (Ginsberg and Shefter), public disaffection from government (Nye, et. al.) or of making Congress work effectively (Rae).

You could also frame a DEBATE and split your team into two debate teams to debate a proposition arising from the reading. Some possible examples: Resolved, that elections count for too little in America's politics. Resolved, that the Republican revolution of 1995 was good for Congress and the country. Resolved, that the American public's disaffection from government is justified. Resolved, that the presidency is a psychologically dangerous office.

Another option involves leading a DISCUSSION in a format similar to that of the sessions I lead. You can use student PMIs to frame your topics of discussion.

You could also bring real world EXAMPLES to bear on the reading. You can ask students to find examples of presidential pathologies, public disaffection with politics, effective party rule in Congress or its absence, or "politics by other means." These examples can then be the basis for discussion. Alternatively, your group could present examples of this sort to the group for discussion.

Other formats can also work. Let your imagination be your guide!

Each member of a managing team must also submit a one-page description of her/his work in preparing for the managed session. This is due at the class that the team manages.

YOUR CLASS PAPER

Your paper is a 9-11 page critical essay comparing two of the books. Your paper must

accomplish four goals: (1) identify the strong and weak arguments, evidence and conclusions in each work; (2) indicate the points of agreement and disagreement between the two books; (3) in instances of disagreement, explain which book has the better argument, evidence and conclusion and why and (4) in conclusion reveal how the books in combination improve your understanding of American government.

Any of the five books teams well with any other for the purposes of this assignment. An outline of your essay (two-page minimum) is due at class on week eight.