

Current Issues in American Politics
Political Science 189H
Fall 2013

Professor John Gruhl

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Office hours: MWF 2-4 (and usually available these days after 4 as well)

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Course Outline:

- A. Facts and Bias in Today's Media
 - "Fragmentation of the Media"; "Bias of the Media"

- B. Big Government, Liberalism, and Conservatism
 - 1. Growth of Big Government
 - "FDR's Lessons for Obama"; "One Nation on Welfare. Living Your Life on the Dole"

 - 2. Big Government Here and Abroad
 - Kingdon (entire book, except the following pages, which are optional: 27-29, 38-39, 50-56. On these pages the author addresses some nuances of the scholarly debate about the points he raises. The author includes these to "cover" himself, but they're not necessary for our purposes.) Paper due—Fri., Sept. 6.

 - "Going Up"; "Why is Europe a Dirty Word?"

 - 3. Efforts to Shrink Big Government
 - "Soul of the New Machine"; "Taxes, and a Dangerous Purity"

 - 4. Consequences of Efforts to Shrink Big Government
 - "Dumb as We Wanna Be"; "Coming Apart"; "America's Can't Do List"

- C. Resurgence of Big Government?
 - 1. President Obama's Policies
 - "Reaching for a New Deal"; "Do Republicans Hate Government? Kind Of."; "How the Stimulus is Changing America"; "Obama's Best Kept Secrets"; "Decline, Fall, Rinse, Repeat"

 - 2. President Obama's Policies: Healthcare
 - Reid, Prologue, chs. 1-3, Appendix

 - "Obama's Health Care Reform"; "What the Affordable Care Act Means If You

Are...”; “Unpopular Mandate”; “For Obamacare to Work, Everyone Must Be In”; “Healthcare Reform in Obama’s Stimulus Law”; “President Barack Obama Could Learn from Franklin D. Roosevelt”; “The Obamacare Start-up Boom”

3. Health Care Costs

“Two Charts that should be in Every Health-Care Discussion”; “Where’s the Waste in Health Care?”; “Bitter Pill” (Time); “21 Graphs that Show America’s Health-Care Prices are Ludicrous”

4. Tea Party Movement

Skocpol and Williamson, ch. 1 (pp. 19-20, 23-24, 26-32, 35-36), ch 2, ch. 5 (pp. 155-168, 169-174, 183-188). Paper due—Mon., Oct. 14 or Wed., Oct. 16 (tentatively).

5. Reaction to President Obama

“How Racist are We? Ask Google”; “There’s No Denying Race Plays a Role in Protests”; “Boy, Oh Boy”; “Kids Hate-Tweet Obama, Echoing What They Hear at Home”

D. Taxes

1. Federal Taxes

2. Changes in Federal Taxes in Recent Decades

3. Loopholes in Federal Taxes

Johnston, chs. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, and Conclusions. (Other chapters are optional.). Paper due—Wed., Oct. 30 or Fri., Nov. 1 (tentatively).

“How Apple Sidesteps Billions in Taxes”

4. Conservatives’ and Obama’s Proposals

E. Deficits

1. The Deficits and the Debt

“The Collapse” (optional); “How the Deficit Got This Big”; “Sources of National Debt”

2. The Budget

“Most of Budget Goes Toward Defense, Social Security, and Major Health Programs”; “Cuts in Smaller Programs Would Make Little Difference in Cutting Deficit”; “Would You Increase, Decrease, or Keep Spending the Same for...?”; “Federal Government Spending as Share of GDP”

3. Social Security

4. Health Care Spending, Military Spending, and Tax Expenditures
 “Bitter Pills” (New Yorker); “Foreseeing the Issues in Medicare’s Future”; “The Force”; “How to Save a Trillion Dollars”; “Reforming Tax Expenditures Can Reduce Deficits....”; “Rise in Debt Could Be Halted....”
 5. Or Not a Big Problem?
 “The Congress-Does-Nothing Deficit Reduction Plan”; “The Low Politics of Low Growth”
- F. Polarization and Dysfunction
 Mann and Ornstein, Introduction, ch. 1 (this chapter has more details about the players in the debt ceiling issue than we need, but read it for the general points), ch. 3 (pp. 81-84)
1. Polarization
 Mann and Ornstein, ch. 2 (all, but for the first class on this topic read pp. 43-middle of 58; for the second class read pp. 58-80); “Southern Discomfort”; “Partisan Polarization Surges in Bush, Obama Years”
 2. Dysfunction
 Mann and Ornstein, ch. 3 (pp. 84-103); ch. 6 (pp. 166-middle of 172)
 3. Cures?
 Mann and Ornstein, ch. 4 (pp. 107-117, 124-130), ch. 5 (pp. 131-149), ch. 6 (pp. 163-164); ch. 7 (pp. 179-197)
- G. Future of the Republican Party
 “GOP’s Red America Forced to Rethink What It Knows about the Country”; “Party, Heal Thyself”; “Send in the Clowns”; “How to Save the GOP”; “Why GOP Will Double Down on a Losing Strategy”; “The Republican Brand Problem—and Why Fixing It Won’t Be Easy”; “Republicans Want Their Party to Change—Just Not the Way You Think”
- H. Contemporary Political Issues in Fiction
 Fountain or Waldman (entire book). Paper due—Fri., Dec. 6 or Mon., Dec. 9 or Wed., Dec. 11
- I. Active Foreign or Domestic Policy?
 “America Can Take a Breather. And It Should”
- J. Pursuit of Happiness?
 “The Pursuit of Happiness”
 Final Exam—Tu., Dec. 17, 10-12

Course Reading:

Kingdon, America, the Unusual
Reid, The Healing of America
Skocpol and Williamson, The Tea Party and the Remaking of American Conservatism
Johnston, Perfectly Legal
Mann and Ornstein, It's Even Worse Than It Looks

In addition, you need to choose one of the following:
Fountain, Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk
Waldman, The Submission

The articles listed on the syllabus are available through the library's E-reserves, accessible via Blackboard or the library's own website.

Course Requirements and Grading:

Four short (three-page) thought papers based on the readings, and a comprehensive final exam, with take-home questions and in-class answers.

There is also an expectation that you participate in class, with questions and comments during lectures and discussions. (Attendance itself does not count as participation—you must participate.) This class will be a forum for the exchange of information and opinions. All students can offer their opinions in an atmosphere of mutual respect. If you ever feel that the atmosphere in class makes it uncomfortable for you to share your views, see me about your concerns.

Weight for Grading:

| | |
|---------------------|----------|
| papers | 1/9 each |
| final exam | 2/9 |
| class participation | 3/9 |

If your grade based on these factors falls on or near a borderline, your pattern of improvement or decline will be taken into account.

If you're taking this course on a pass-no pass basis, you must do C (not C-) work to pass. (Note: political science courses, except internships, taken on a pass-no pass basis do not count toward a political science major.)

Course Policies:

Attendance: Not taken, but you, of course, are responsible for all material covered in class and need to attend to participate. A significant portion of the final exam

will come from material covered in class.

Make-up Papers and Final Exam: Available only in special circumstances. You should receive prior permission from me or certification by a doctor. If you do not complete an assignment, you will receive a zero (not an F).

Incompletes: Available only in special circumstances.

Cheating: Using crib notes during the exam, or copying from other sources—students, periodicals, books, internet, etc.—without proper acknowledgment is cheating. These and any other forms of cheating will result at least in a F for the assignment; they may result in more serious punishment in accordance with university policies. If you have questions about proper acknowledgment, see me.

Disability: Students with disabilities should contact me for a confidential discussion of their individual needs. It is UNL's policy to provide flexible and individualized accommodation to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities or meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office, 132 Canfield Administration, (402) 472-3787.

ACE Information:

Learning Outcome: This course has been approved for Learning Outcome #6 (Use knowledge, theories, methods, and historical perspectives appropriate to the social sciences to understand and evaluate human behavior.)

Reinforcements: Writing. Good writing on the papers and final exam is expected and emphasized. The papers are graded on the basis of style as well as content. Typos, grammatical mistakes, and awkward sentences will be flagged, and organization and clarity will be taken into account. The distinguishing characteristic separating the high papers from the middle and low papers often is the quality of the writing. The instructor will provide extensive feedback on the papers and will address stylistic problems that emerge.

Opportunities for Learning the Outcome: There will be some lectures, to provide background information, when we begin new topics. These lectures will always include opportunities for questions and comments. There will be many discussions. With our small class size, class participation is encouraged—in fact, required. In lieu of a single textbook, there will be six topical books and numerous articles addressing the current issues covered in the course. We will have discussions on the books and articles. Throughout the semester, the class will have an informal atmosphere with give and take between the instructor and the students, who are expected to play an active role. There will be considerable opportunity to learn about these important issues and to form your own opinions toward them.

How Your Achievement of the Outcome Will Be Assessed: You will write four short (three-page) papers answering questions about the books. These papers will require careful

reading of the books; they will not require additional research. The papers will also require an ability to summarize and critique the points in the books. They will be graded for style as well as content. In addition, you will have a comprehensive final exam. The exam will be all essay. You will be given study questions in advance to direct your studying, and the exam questions will be chosen from these study questions. Your class participation will also be graded. Each day after class, the instructor will note your participation, using a series of checks, check pluses, and full pluses, reflecting the quantity and, especially, the quality of your participation that day. The instructor will keep a running tally throughout the semester, and at the end of the semester he will use this tally to assign grades for the participation component of your course grade. You may ask the instructor to see his tally of your participation any time during the semester.