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Course Overview: Politics

"Politics is the art of the possible"
--Otto von Bismark

Content

Politics is a semester long component of the Humanities Core which explores the philosophical, institutional, and legal foundations of governmental systems and American constitutional democracy. The course provides students with the opportunity to examine their own values and beliefs about human nature, social ethics, and the proper role of government in our society. Students are encouraged to develop their own political philosophies and voices, and to acquire the skills necessary to participate meaningfully in the political life of our nation. Course content emphasizes analytical reading, critical thinking, persuasive writing, discussion and debate.

Texts and Required Reading

The primary readings for this course are Plato's *Republic*, selected chapters of the textbooks *The Challenge of Democracy* and *Magruder's American Government*, and assorted articles, web-based materials, and book excerpts assembled by the instructor. **Students are expected to complete all required reading assignments and come prepared to actively engage in classroom discussions.**

Evaluation

Student grades are based on the successful completion of a variety of in-class and homework assignments including quick writes, reading questions, reflective and analytical essays, quizzes, exams, and individual and collaborative group projects. Classroom discussions and debates are an *extremely important* part of the curriculum and are critical to the overall quality of our shared learning experience. **Accordingly, classroom participation comprises a significant portion of a student's overall grade. Late work is ordinarily not accepted**, but students are encouraged to speak with the instructor in the event that extraordinary circumstances arise.

Topic Outline

1. **Preliminary Questions**

   - What is politics? What is government?
   - What is democracy?
   - What are the responsibilities of citizens in American democracy?

2. Moral and Political Philosophy
Essential Question: What is justice?

- Plato's *Republic*: The Search for the Ideal Society.
- Contemporary Moral and Ethical Dilemmas.
- Criminal Justice in America.

3. Political Ideology
Essential Question: What are my political beliefs, values, and ideology?

- Fundamental Values: Freedom, Order and Equality.
- Liberalism, Conservatism, Libertarianism, and Communitarianism.
- American Political Parties: A Political Party Convention.
- Personal Political Ideologies.

4. Electoral Politics
Essential Question: How do Americans select their leaders?

- The Electoral Process: Nominations, Campaigns, and Voting.
- The 2018 National, State, and Local Elections.
- Ballot Initiatives and Referenda: California's Direct Democracy.

5. Political Institutions
Essential Question: What is the structure and function of the Federal, State, and Local Governments?

- The Constitution: The Blueprint for the U.S. Government.
- Legislative Bodies and the Lawmaking Process.
- Presidential Powers at Home and Abroad.
- The Federal Courts: Modern Economic and Social Policy.
- Federalism: Divided Power Between State and Federal Governments.

6. Civil Liberties and Civil Rights
Essential Questions: What rights are protected by the Bill of Rights?

- The Bill of Rights and International Human Rights.
- Criminal Due Process: Amendments 4, 5, 6 & 8.
- Equal Protection: The Rights of Racial, Ethnic, and Religious Minorities.
- Privacy Rights: Reproductive Freedom, the Abortion Controversy, and the Rights of the LGBTQ Community.

7. The Role of the Mass Media
Essential Question: How does the media shape and influence the political process?

- Analyzing the Mass Media and Political Advertising in the Internet Age.
- Social Media and Modern Political Campaigns.
- Democratic Theory v. Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent.*

8. **Public Policy Debates**
   Essential Question: What should government do?

9. **Political Participation**
   Essential Question: How can I participate in politics in a personally meaningful way?

   - Voter Education Project: The 2018 State Ballot Propositions.
   - Politics in Action I: Observing a Political Meeting or Court Hearing.
   - Politics in Action II: Drafting a Political Letter.