AP United States Government and Politics Syllabus

Advanced Placement U.S. Government and Politics Overview

This course explores the political theory and everyday practice that directs the daily operation of our government. The purpose of this course is to help students gain and display an understanding of American politics and the processes of government that help shape our public policies. Throughout the course, we will examine our institutions of government, the people who run those institutions, the public policies made by those institutions, and the influences of the electorate and other groups on policy. By the completion of the course, students will be able to understand and evaluate competing arguments and formulate and express opinions on political and policymaking processes.

This course is the equivalent of an introductory, one semester college course in American government and it requires a substantial amount of reading and preparation for every class. Students will study U.S. foundational documents, Supreme Court decisions, and other texts and visuals to gain an understanding of the relationships and interactions among political institutions, processes, and behaviors. They will also engage in disciplinary practices that require them to read and interpret data, make comparisons and applications, and develop evidence-based arguments. In addition, they will complete a political science research or applied civics project.

The Disciplinary Practices and Reasoning Processes

Questions on the AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam ask students to apply the course content through the disciplinary practices and reasoning skills.

Throughout the course, students will have the opportunity to develop these five disciplinary practices:

• Practice 1: Concept Application

• Practice 2: SCOTUS Application

• Practice 3: Data Analysis

• Practice 4: Source Analysis

• Practice 5: Argumentation

While engaging in the disciplinary practices, students will also apply the following reasoning
skills:

- Reasoning Process 1: Definition/Classification
- Reasoning Process 2: Process
- Reasoning Process 3: Causation
- Reasoning Process 4: Comparison

**Course Reading Material**

Required textbook for the course:


Supplemental sources:


Additionally, throughout the course, articles from major periodicals and newspapers (such as *Time, Newsweek, The Washington Post, The Washington Times, New York Times, and Wall Street Journal*) will be assigned.

Additionally, students will have access to the following free online resources:

- **AP United States Government and Politics reading skills lessons** – This resource contains all of the required Supreme Court cases and foundational documents, along with close reading and discussion questions and activities.

- **Oyez** – This online database provides succinct and accessible overviews for all Supreme Court cases.

- **The National Constitution Center’s Interactive Constitution** – This online resource is an annotated U.S. Constitution that includes essays from multiple perspectives that frame the debates underlying key clauses and provisions of the U.S. Constitution. The National Constitution Center also has a blog that applies constitutional principles to current events.
**Reading Reports**

Each student will be assigned multiple scholarly articles and/or primary sources throughout the year. For each assigned reading, the student must analyze the document and prepare a written and oral report, including the author’s thesis, evidence that supports the author’s thesis, and connections to AP U.S. Government and Politics material taught during class.

**Analytical paper assignment:** Students will be required to write three analytical papers about important topics in United States government and politics. These papers will be due on varying dates during the semester. Each paper must be no more than four pages in length. In each paper, the students must briefly summarize the assigned readings, connect the readings to the current unit of study (how they do this will vary depending on the resources provided for each paper and the unit of study in which it is due), and make a connection between the readings and a current political issue. One to two analytical paper assignments will require students to also examine how the assigned article and a required case/foundational document corroborate or contradict one another.

**Debates:** Students, in teams of three, will participate in a debate about a current public policy or issue in American government and politics. Each team will get a five-minute opening statement, a five-minute cross examination period, and a five-minute closing statement. Students must also have a visual that helps support their main arguments. This visual can be a chart, graph, table, political cartoon, or infographic. Students will analyze the visuals presented by other teams as part of the debate. Finally, each team is responsible for providing an annotated works cited page of the resources used to develop their arguments and questions.

**Using Graphs, Charts, and Political Cartoons**

Students are regularly tested on their understanding of quantitative and visually presented information (charts and graphs) at regular intervals in the quiz assignments. They are also responsible for including data analysis and interpretation in their free-response question (FRQ) writing assignments.

**Got Questions? Need Extra Help?**

Please schedule a time to meet with me if you have questions or difficulties.

Websites such as Oyez.org can provide additional information and support about the required
Supreme Court cases. The National Constitution Center's Interactive Constitution is a valuable resource for understanding this living document. Videos and podcasts available from the National Constitution Center can also help with your understanding of our government.

**Current Events**

Because of the constantly changing nature of public policy and politics, it is highly recommended that students keep abreast of the current state of U.S. government and politics through the reading of newspapers and other periodicals, as well as the regular viewing of news broadcasts. For newspapers/periodicals, consider *The Washington Post* or *Congressional Quarterly Weekly*. For news broadcasts, consider *Newshour* (PBS), *Nightline* (NBC), *This Week* (ABC), *Meet the Press* (NBC), and *Face the Nation* (NBC). Students may be required to keep a current event journal.

**Exams and Quizzes**

There will be an exam at the end of each unit. Exams will cover material from class readings, homework, class discussions, and class assignments. Because the AP Exam will expect students to analyze and interpret the entire content of the course (rather than memorizing facts) and apply the disciplinary practices and reasoning processes, it is expected that students are familiar with all content areas previously studied at all times. All students taking this course are expected to take the AP Exam. All quizzes and tests in this course follow the format and language usage patterns found on the AP Exam. Therefore, students will be comfortable dealing with the questions that will be on the exam.

**Overview of the AP Exam and Keys to AP Exam Success**

The AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam will be comprised of the following sections:

Multiple-Choice Questions:  Number of Questions: 55  
Structure – The questions on multiple choice will ask students to:

- Analyze and compare political concepts

- Analyze and interpret quantitative, text-based, and visual sources

- Apply course concepts, foundational documents, and Supreme Court decisions in a variety of hypothetical and real-world scenarios
Timing: One hour and 20 minutes Percentage of Total Exam: 50%

Free-Response Questions: Number of Questions: 4  Structure – The four questions on the free response will ask students to:

• Apply political concepts in real-world scenarios

• Compare the decisions and implications of different Supreme Court cases

• Analyze quantitative data

• Develop an argument using required foundational documents as evidence

Timing: One hour and 40 minutes Percentage of Total Exam: 50%

As the breakdown of the AP Exam highlights, success in this course and on the AP Exam requires far more than the memorization of political knowledge. Success in this course and on the AP Exam requires connection-making with the aim of being able to analyze political information, regardless of the format the information is presented, and develop a factually accurate, thoughtful, and well-reasoned opinion regarding this information.

The different pieces of the course fit together in pursuit of this aim through course content and big ideas, reasoning processes, and disciplinary practices.

**Required Supreme Court Cases**

This course will incorporate the analysis of the following 15 required Supreme Court cases:

• Marbury v. Madison (1803)
• McCulloch v. Maryland (1819)
• Schenck v. United States (1919)
• Brown v. Board of Education (1954)
• Baker v. Carr (1961)
• Engel v. Vitale (1962)
• Gideon v. Wainwright (1963)
• Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District (1969)
• New York Times Company v. United States (1971)
• Wisconsin v. Yoder (1972)
• Roe v. Wade (1973)
• Shaw v. Reno (1993)
• United States v. Lopez (1995)
• McDonald v. Chicago (2010)

Students are provided opportunities to analyze the 15 required Supreme Court cases as described in the *AP U.S. Government and Politics Curriculum Framework* and connect them to other non-required landmark cases.

For each of these cases, the facts, issues, holdings, and reasoning underlying the majority opinions can be found through the Oyez database online. Oyez also has an app that can be downloaded to smartphones. Students will be required to complete multiple assignments analyzing and comparing these cases with other non-required, contemporary landmark cases.

Students are provided opportunities to analyze the 15 required Supreme Court cases as described in the *AP U.S. Government and Politics Curriculum Framework* and connect them to other non-required landmark cases. The list above is not an exhaustive list of the Supreme Court cases that will be analyzed and discussed in this course. Additionally, students will have access to the *AP United States Government and Politics reading skills lessons* which includes information and majority opinion excerpts for cases that complement the required cases, such as:

• Gonzales v. Raich (2005) to go along with the analysis of McCulloch v. Maryland (1819)
• Heart of Atlanta Motels v. United States (1964) to go along with the analysis of United States v. Lopez (1995)
• Zelman v. Simmons-Harris (2002) to go along with the analysis of Engel v. Vitale (1962)
• Morse v. Frederick (2007) to go along with the analysis of Tinker v. Des Moines (1969)

**Required Foundational Documents**

This course will incorporate both in-class and take home assignments in which students are asked to analyze and discuss the nine required foundational documents to help them understand the context and beliefs of the founders and their critics and the debates surrounding the writing and ratification of the U.S. Constitution:

• The Declaration of Independence
The course provides opportunities to analyze and interpret qualitative sources (primary and secondary sources including the nine required foundational documents) to explain how they relate to political concepts. To aid in the analysis of these foundational documents, students will also have access to the AP United States Government and Politics reading skills lessons. This online reader contains strategies for analyzing the required foundational documents and a sampling of related readings, including:

- Excerpts from Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government* to go along with the analysis of the Declaration of Independence
- “Letters from the Federal Farmer to the Republican I” to go along with the analysis of the Articles of Confederation
- Essays from the National Constitution Center’s “Matters of Debate” series (Interactive Constitution resource) to go along with the analysis of the Tenth Amendment

**Applied Civics Research Project (Throughout the Semester)**

Students will formulate a research question related to one of the units of study in AP U.S. Government and Politics. Students will engage throughout the year in applied civics or politics research to collect data on their respective topic. Applied research involves collecting and analyzing qualitative or quantitative data by participating in a process and/or activity. Participation can come in a variety of forms: interviews, volunteering, or attending meetings, among others. During the month before the AP Exam, students will present their findings to their classmates in one of several acceptable modes of presentation (more information to follow). Possible research questions include:

- Creating a voter guide – how do candidates’ positions compare on key issues?
- How do political parties allocate resources to accomplish their goals?
• Which strategies do interest groups use to influence policy, and how effective are these strategies?

• How does law enforcement balance individual liberty with public safety?

• To what extent does the news media contribute to increasing polarization?

• How does the cost of elections impact the activities of members of Congress?

• How should the federal budget be balanced?

**Instructional Schedule**

This AP U.S. Government and Politics class is taught in one semester using a traditional school day schedule. Each class period is 47 minutes long. There are approximately 75 instructional days in each semester.

Unit 1: Foundations of American Democracy (15 days)
Unit 2: Interactions Among Branches of Government (20 days)
Unit 3: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights (9 days)
Unit 4: American Political Ideologies and Beliefs (10 days)
Unit 5: Political Participation (16 days)

Five days are left unaccounted for to allow for flexibility.

**AP U.S. Government and Politics Course Plan**

**Unit 1: Foundations of American Democracy**

(15 days)

**Essential Questions**

- How did the founders of the U.S. Constitution attempt to protect individual liberty, while also promoting public order and safety?
- How have theory, debate, and compromise influenced the U.S. constitutional system?
- How does development and interpretation of the Constitution influence policies that impact U.S. citizens?

**Readings**
• The Declaration of Independence
• Federalist No. 10
• Brutus No. 1
• Federalist No. 51
• The Articles of Confederation
• The Constitution of the United States (Articles I-VII, 10th and 14th Amendments)
• McCulloch v. Maryland (1819)
• Lopez v. United States (1995)

Primary Unit Focus

• The philosophical foundations and documents of American democracy, including the Declaration of Independence, social contract theory, republicanism, types of democracy, and the tension between individual liberty and order/safety.

• How the Articles of Confederation failed to adequately balance individual liberty and public order/safety, and how the framers wrestled with these questions in drafting the Constitution.

• The compromises reached at the Constitutional Convention and the debate between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists during the ratification debate.

• The evolving relationship between the national and state governments, including the grant process, policy issues (ADA, Medicaid, marijuana), and the idea of devolution.

Instructional Activities for Unit 1

1. 3-2-1 Activity/Seminar. Using the 3-2-1 seminar protocol, students discuss the “How American Politics Went Insane” article from The Atlantic. This will allow students to connect the current state of politics to important Unit 1 concepts such as popular sovereignty, republicanism, and social contract theory of government. This is a high interest article that will help “hook” students at the start of the semester.

2. Students brainstorm a list of things they believe government should do by asking the question, “What should government do?” Make a list of student responses on the board. Use this list to facilitate a discussion about order, liberty, and equality. Then share the Preamble to the Constitution and have students link their list to the language in the Preamble.
3. Debate. Two teams of three students each debate the resolution, “States have exceeded their authority in legalizing recreational marijuana use, and the federal government should reassert its national supremacy over drug policy.”

4. Analytical paper “Our Broken Constitution” due. The purpose of this analytical paper is to allow the students to examine criticisms of how the U.S. Constitution operates in modern America. Student papers must connect the issues the author explores to arguments made by the Anti-Federalists, in particular, Brutus No. 1.

5. Checks and balances graphic organizer. During class lessons and their reading of the Constitution, students create a graphic organizer detailing the system of checks and balances. In addition to the basic checks and balances system, students annotate their organizer with a list of Supreme Court cases and public policies that gave one or more branches the opportunity to check another.

6. Free-Response Question (FRQ). Students respond to a textual, qualitative-based FRQ comparing the McCulloch and the Lopez decisions. The FRQ will include an excerpt from the McCulloch and/or the Lopez decision. The FRQ will require the students to understand and make connections to the concepts of enumerated, implied powers, and federalism.

Unit 2: Interactions Among Branches of Government

(20 days)

Essential Questions

- How do the branches of the national government compete and cooperate in order to govern?
- To what extent have changes in the powers of each branch affected how responsive and accountable the national government is in the 21st century?

Readings

- The Constitution of the United States (Articles I-III)
- Baker v. Carr (1962)
- Shaw v. Reno (1993)
- Federalist No. 70
- Federalist No. 78
- Marbury v. Madison
Primary Unit Focus

- Structure of Congress, including significant differences between the chambers regarding organization, leadership, incumbency, and powers.
- Congressional representation and gerrymandering.
- The president’s formal and informal powers.
- How the bureaucracy operates and its place in the checks and balances system. The future of entitlement spending in the United States.

Instructional Activities for Unit 2

1. Budget simulation and class discussion. Using the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget’s *The Debt Fixer* website and the quantitative data therein, students try to reduce the debt as a percentage of GDP. After completing the online simulation, students discuss the difficulties they encountered in reducing the size of the national debt. During this discussion students should link the budget process to important concepts such as entitlement spending and the political nature of the budget.
2. Debate. Two teams of three students each debate the resolution, “Congress has abandoned its role in the checks and balances system.”
3. Analytical paper for “Unilateral Action and Presidential Power: A Theory” and *Federalist No. 70* due. The purpose of this paper is for the students to examine the growth of presidential power and how the other two branches may attempt to check presidential power.
4. Checks and balances role play. Using a lesson from the National Constitution Center’s Separation of Powers Lesson Plan as a model, students engage in a simulation in which they develop a plan of action to ensure the creation/implementation of a policy based on the powers given to their assigned branch of government (legislative, executive, judicial). In addition to developing this plan of action for their own goal, students must develop a plan to either support or oppose another branch’s goal.
5. Watch “The Stackhouse Filibuster” (Season 2, Episode 17) from *The West Wing*. Political concepts examined in this episode include the filibuster, the White House Staff, the presidential relationship with the press, and how legislation is developed by both the presidency and Congress. *The West Wing* is available on both Netflix and iTunes.
6. Students complete at least two of the scenarios in The Redistricting Game found online. This is an online simulation that allows the students to draw and gerrymander imaginary congressional districts. The simulation has four different scenarios, each with a different
take on the process of redistricting and gerrymandering. As students complete each of the scenarios, they respond to a set of questions about the process and the difficulties they encountered. All students must do scenario 1, a straight redistricting scenario. The second scenario is up to them. In addition to completing two of the scenarios, students read about proposed changes to the redistricting process and respond to these proposals.

7. Students respond to a quantitative data FRQ regarding presidential vetoes and the interaction between the president and Congress.

8. Students respond to a scenario-based FRQ examining how the bureaucracy operates and its interactions with the presidency, Congress, and the courts.

**Unit 3: Civil Liberties and Civil Rights**

**(9 days)**

**Essential Questions**

- To what extent do the U.S. Constitution and its amendments protect against undue government infringement on essential liberties and from invidious discrimination?
- How have U.S. Supreme Court rulings defined civil liberties and civil rights?

**Readings**

- The Bill of Rights
- The 14th Amendment’s due process and equal protection clauses
- Engel v. Vitale (1962)
- Wisconsin v. Yoder (1972)
- Schenck v. United States (1919)
- New York Times Co. v. United States (1971)
- McDonald v. Chicago (2010)
- Gideon v. Wainwright (1963)
- Roe v. Wade (1973)
- Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka Kansas (1954)
- “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

**Primary Unit Focus**
• The role of the courts, and the due process and equal protection clauses in the expansion of civil liberties and civil rights, including the idea of selective incorporation.
• The expansion of the liberties protected by the 1st and 2nd Amendments.
• The development of the right to privacy and its implications for reproductive rights and 4th Amendment protections.
• A history of civil rights issues and how historically disadvantaged groups in American society have achieved greater equality and equitable treatment in society.

Instructional Activities for Unit 3

1. Bill of Rights scenarios. Students write five hypothetical scenarios regarding civil liberties. Each scenario should be clearly tied to one of the amendments found in the Bill of Rights. Students must also create a “key” for their scenarios. In their key, students must identify the amendment the scenario involves, the required Supreme Court case that incorporated or clarified the application of the amendment in question, and finally the students must link the required case to a non-required, contemporary case that deals with the same constitutional issue.
2. Debate. Two teams of three students each debate the resolution, “History has proven that affirmative action programs are necessary to safeguard equal opportunity in both education and employment for minorities.”
3. Analytical paper "Jim Crow 2.0? Why States Consider and Adopt Restrictive Voter Access Policies" due. The purpose of this analytical paper is to allow students to explore the recent actions by many states that may have a negative impact on the right to vote in those states. In this analytical paper, students write a thesis and defend it with information from the article, the course, and recent political and social events.
4. Students respond to a textual FRQ that uses one of the required Supreme Court cases and a non-required, contemporary case. The FRQ will require students to examine the Court’s decision in both cases and apply the Court’s reasoning to a related course concept.

Unit 4: American Political Ideologies and Beliefs

(10 days)

Essential Questions

- How are American political beliefs formed and how do they evolve over time?
- How do political ideology and core values influence government policy making?

Readings
- The Monkey Cage series on political polarization in America found at *The Washington Post*.

**Primary Unit Focus**

- Elements of a scientific poll, the different types of polls, and how they are used in U.S. government and politics.
- The basic tenets of American political culture, the conservative and liberal political ideologies, and how these are acquired (political socialization).

**Instructional Activities for Unit 4**

1. Using Gallup.com, Polling Report.com, and the *Pew Research Center*, students study different polls regarding a variety of policy issues in the United States. Students are provided several examples of polls with questionable reliability. Students must write a comparison of what makes one poll reliable and another unreliable and explain how public policy is affected by the accuracy and reliability of polls.
2. Students take the *Pew Research Center*’s Political Typology quiz. This quiz places the students into one of nine political typologies – it divides the traditional left/right spectrum into several subgroups (four on each side of the center and one for non-engaged quiz takers). After the students have completed the quiz, they write their names on the class political spectrum, as does the teacher. Then as a class they discuss how the class does or does not reflect the larger community and what might account for the class’s overall political ideology.
3. Analytical paper "Polarized or Sorted? Just What’s Wrong with Our Politics, Anyway?" and “America's Missing Moderates: Hiding in Plain Sight" due. The purpose of this analytical paper is to allow students to compare the competing views on partisan polarization in American political culture. In this paper, students must evaluate which argument regarding polarization best reflects the reality in American political culture today.
4. Debate. Two teams of three students each debate the resolution, “Demographic changes represent a threat to the long-term electoral success of the Republican Party.”
5. Class poster presentations of party platforms. Divide the class in half – one half examines
the Democratic Party platform and the other half examines the Republican Party platform. Within each platform, students pair to explore a particular topic, such as education, defense, entitlement spending, etc. and create a post that explains the party’s policy proposals for that particular topic. Students then present their findings to the class. As a follow-up homework assignment, students then research public opinion polls on their issue and write a summary of how the American public feels about their issue and evaluate whether or not their assigned party reflects the American public. Finally, students must identify a policy from their assigned platform and determine if it has been implemented and how.

6. Students respond to a quantitative data FRQ regarding changing demographics in the United States. Students have to interpret data from the U.S. Census Bureau regarding racial and age composition of the United States and how they are changing. Students also link these demographic changes to representation in Congress. The final section of the FRQ will require students to assess the potential impacts of these changes on the two political parties and the policies each party promotes.

**Unit 5: Political Participation**

(16 days)

**Essential Questions**

- How have changes in technology influenced political communication and behavior?

- Why do levels of participation and influence in politics vary?

- How effective are the various methods of political participation in shaping public policies?

**Readings**

- *Federalist No. 10*
- Citizens United v. FEC (2010)
- Kiely, Eugene, and Lori Robertson. "How to Spot Fake News." FactCheck.org,
November 18, 2016.


**Primary Unit Focus**

- The evolution of voting rights and the current state of voter turnout.

- Factors that influence voter choice in elections.

- The functions of political parties in the United States and third parties in United States government and politics.

- The development of candidate-centered campaigns.

- The role of social movements in major electoral shifts and party realignments.

- Interest groups in United States government and politics.

- Nominations, campaigns, and elections in United States government and politics.

- The media as a linkage institution, including changes in media, such as the growth of social media and partisan media sources.

**Instructional Activities for Unit 5**

1. To better understand how state election laws impact voter turnout, students find voter turnout data from a state that has passed a strict voter ID law in the 21st century, such as Wisconsin, Indiana, or Texas. Prior to their research, students formulate a hypothesis about the impact voter ID laws have on voter turnout. Students then research voter turnout stats from the presidential election prior to the passage of that state’s voter ID law, and the presidential election immediately after the passage of voter ID laws. Students break the data down by major demographic groups, such as race, age, and education. Students write a summary of their findings, including an evaluation of their thesis and reasons why their thesis was correct/incorrect.

2. Debate. Two teams of three students each debate the resolution, “Interest groups have too much influence in the policy process and are detrimental to democracy.”

3. Analytical paper "The Electoral College: How It Works in Contemporary Presidential Elections" due. The purpose of this analytical paper is to have students examine the
original design and purpose of the Electoral College, and then assess how it works in modern U.S. politics, with special attention paid to the 2016 election. In this paper, students must examine the various proposals to reform the Electoral College and assess the advantages and disadvantages to each, explaining why the current system should either be maintained, revised, or completely eliminated and replaced with election by national popular vote.

4. After the lesson regarding the theory of critical elections, students use presidential election data from the 20th and 21st centuries to classify each election as either a critical election or a deviating election.

5. Students write an essay, with an analytical thesis, that incorporates information from a select list of foundational documents that examines the influence of interest groups on the policy-making process in the United States.

6. After the lesson on the media as a linkage institution, especially the part about partisan media and social media, students complete a media analysis assignment. Students are assigned to read two articles about a specific policy issue in the United States. One article is from a conservative source and one from a liberal source. They then analyze the two sources – making note of the facts provided, the viewpoints expressed in each, and other differences between the two sources. This will also allow students to make a connection to gridlock in the national government.

7. Political Science Research Project. After reading “How to Spot Fake News” at FactCheck.org as homework, students work in groups to identify the fake news stories in their assigned packet (the packet contains both legitimate and fake news stories). Students first develop a list of indicators which they can use to determine if each story is fake news or not and then they conduct a content analysis of each report. Finally, they share the results with the class and assess the extent to which political science research provided in the course can provide guidance for discerning the difference between valid and invalid news stories.