

FAQs about PS 105

Haven't I taken this course before?

If you are like most students, you have been forced to take some version of American Government two or three times during your adolescent years. From my experience, it seems that very little information sticks – most students come into this class with little interest in or knowledge about the U.S. Government. I suspect that students were often required in previous government classes to learn trivial details and boring facts. Because we will be focusing on “bigger” questions, you will learn a lot more than you picked up before. Some of this will be familiar, but you will not go through the whole course with a feeling of *déjà vu*.

What is the classroom instruction like?

It varies from session to session. Some days will mainly be lecture, others will be oriented around discussion, and some will involve activities. I like to do a lot of small group work, as research has shown that more “active learning” is generally much more effective in terms of achieving objectives. Students often groan at first, but most come to like the variety of instructional methods. It is the single most common thing identified as a “strong point” on student evaluations.

Is the professor going to try to make me a [Republican/Democrat]?

Absolutely not. Last semester, 15 of my students thought I was for McCain; 13 thought I was for Obama.

Come on, really?

Really. In fact, my main bias is that I believe that political conflict is healthy in a democratic society. Problems are most likely to occur when disagreement is somehow stifled. The result is that I like seeing students mature politically, even when they develop views that might differ quite sharply from my own.

What are the exams like?

They are pretty hard, but I try to avoid testing you on trivia or otherwise irrelevant details (noting that we may disagree on what counts as “trivia”). Typically, about two-thirds of the exams are multiple choice, and one-third short answer and essay. Here are a couple of questions from recent exams:

The presidential veto power is

- a. not very strong, as Congress frequently overrides his vetoes.
- b. the best way to initiate (begin) legislation.
- c. extremely strong, even when it is not used.
- d. subject to be reversed by the Supreme Court.
- e. not actually found in the Constitution.

Suppose you were a member of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, and you believed that the State of Texas was permitted to outlaw abortion if it wanted to do so. Assuming that your vote did not change the outcome of *Roe v. Wade*, what *type* of opinion would you have written (majority, concurring, or dissenting)? Briefly explain your answer.

I think these are fair representations of my exam questions. Let me know if you'd like the answers.

Do most students get an A in this course?

No. I wish they did, but they do not. This past semester, the grade distribution was 6 A's, 13 B's, 4 C's, 5 D's, and 1 F. The average course percentage was an 81.4%.

What can I do to improve my chances of getting an A?

The key thing you can do is to prepare for exams. Most students make an attempt to study, but very few actually *prepare*. Carefully go through your class notes, and take time to anticipate the questions that I am likely to ask. It is even better if you do this weekly throughout the semester, so that you will become aware of areas that are unclear to you. Doing so will give you time to clear up any confusion before it is too late.

More tangibly, you need to take notes properly. Some students do nothing more than copy the words on the PowerPoint slides. While that is better than nothing, you should know that the bullet points are meant as guidance only, and they will not suffice for full credit answers on exams. Also, use the textbook to supplement the class notes, to clarify terminology and other concepts, and to expand on the material from the lectures and discussions.

Above all, it is essential that you attend class and that you pay close attention during class. Very few students who are actively attentive to the material during the class sessions do poorly in the course.

Does attendance count as part of your grade?

It does not. You will not receive any points just for showing up. In fact, when I say it like that, it becomes clear that it would be a silly thing for me to do – maybe even a little bit insulting. When I say that attendance will help your grade, I mean indirectly – and that’s why I pair *attendance* with *attention*. If you come to class but pay no attention, you might as well be somewhere else. I am speaking from experience – if you are here, and you pay attention, you will probably do well. If not, you probably won’t.

What if I have to miss class?

If at all possible, you should notify me in advance. Treat this class as you would treat a job. If you had a conflict, or even a medical situation, you would call your employer to let them know that you can’t make it. I ask that you give me the same courtesy, preferably in writing (email is fine). While we’re on this subject, please be aware that you are responsible for obtaining the notes from the class you missed; I will explain anything you do not understand, but I will not provide notes for you.

By itself, your notice does not “excuse” your absence. Just wanted to be clear about that.

Incidentally, it is a myth that every student skips class. Last semester, out of 28 students in this course, 15 had *zero* unexcused absences, 9 of whom had perfect attendance.

What if I oversleep, or some other emergency comes up, and I am unable to contact you in advance?

Again, think of this as a job. Such things happen on occasion – just let me know as soon as possible afterward. Depending on the explanation, your absence may still be marked as unexcused, but you will at least have met your professional obligation to me.

What if I am going to be late?

As long as you can be discreet about it, come anyway. In other words, take a seat near the back, and try not to disturb others as you get settled. You should also explain to me after class what happened. Again, think of this as your job – being late sometimes occurs, but it should not become a habit.

What if I have a problem with my grade, or have some other grievance or concern?

Talk to me about it. It is unproductive and unhealthy to let something stew. I would prefer that you email me with a brief description of your concern, asking for an appointment to talk to me in person. But be careful: It is essential that you maintain a tone of civility no matter how aggrieved you feel. I cannot promise that you will ultimately be pleased with the outcome, but I can assure you that you will know that you have been treated fairly and courteously.

Will I like this course?

Yes. But you’ll like it a lot more if you do your part.