POLITICAL SCIENCE 270
AMERICAN LEGAL SYSTEM
MWF 11:40-12:30 Coor 174

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES
This class is an introduction to the American legal and judicial system. We will examine the role of law in society, the structure and functioning of courts, the selection and behavior of judges and other political actors (e.g., lawyers, litigants, juries, and interest groups), and the impact of judicial decisions on society. We will also conduct an in-depth examination of relevant topics in civil and criminal law. Our examination of courts will include both state and federal courts and both trial and appellate courts, paying particular attention to the role of United States Supreme Court. This semester, we will pay close attention to the selection of judges, particularly Supreme Court Justices due to Justice O’Connor’s retirement and President Bush’s nomination of Judge John G. Roberts, Jr. to fill her vacancy. We will have the opportunity to see how the Senate performs its constitutional role to provide the president with “advice and consent” on judicial nominees. We will compare the process of federal judicial selection with the selection and retention of judges in the states and in other countries. You should pay close and regular attention to these issues in the news.

Required Reading:
Books:

2. Stern, Gerald. The Buffalo Creek Disaster. 1976. Vintage Press. Available at the campus bookstore or from any online source such as Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com.

3. Some readings on the syllabus are available from Infotrac, a research index available through the publisher of your textbook. Included in your textbook is a free four-month subscription to Infotrac. You will need to register for this service online using the passcode included in your book. (Here is the URL: http://infotrac.thomsonlearning.com/). These readings are indicated on the outline below. To locate the assigned article, search under the author’s last name and part of the title using the search procedure. You should print the article so that you have it to review for the exams or the projects. If you have any trouble accessing these articles please let me or the Teaching Assistant know and we will help you.

4. There are a handful of readings available online. The URL is listed below. They are indicated with an asterisk (*).

GRADING
Your grade in this class will be based on three exams that are each worth 25% of your final grade.
(75% total), and reaction papers to topical videos shown in class (25%). Each of these components is described below.

**Exams:** The exams will be made up of a mix of identification questions and short answers. The material will be drawn from your readings as well as lectures, so it is important that you come to class regularly and do the assigned readings—one is not a substitute for the other. I will not provide a study guide for the exams nor will I provide any extra credit opportunities. The exams are not cumulative. Together, your grade on the exams will comprise 75 percent of your final grade (each is worth 25 percent of your final grade). I will not give make-up exams unless there is a documented personal emergency. In such a circumstance, you must notify me as promptly as possible.

**Short responses to videos:** This semester we will watch six videos relevant to the weekly subject matter. You are required to write five short reaction papers (approximately two typed pages). In those papers, you should think about the content of the film and how it relates to what we have been discussing in class. Some of the videos may take one full day, and part of a second session to view. However, the papers must be turned in after the first day we see the video. For example, if we watch a video on Monday and Wednesday, your reaction papers are due in class on Wednesday. I will not accept papers late or electronically—they must be turned in during class to receive credit.

**Grading Scale:** I will use a +/- grading scale as follows:

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\begin{align*}
100 & = A+ \\
93 - 99 & = A \\
89 - 92 & = A- \\
86 - 88 & = B+ \\
83 - 85 & = B \\
80 - 82 & = B- \\
76 - 78 & = C+ \\
73 - 75 & = C \\
70 - 72 & = C- \\
66 - 68 & = D+ \\
63 - 65 & = D \\
60 - 62 & = D- \\
0 - 58 & = E \\
\end{align*}
\]

**Disabilities:** If you have any disability or condition that might affect your ability to complete the required assignments, please see me during the first week of class so that we can make alternative arrangements.

**Outline and Readings:**

**Week 1** 8/22

**INTRODUCTION**

Overview of Semester

8/24

**THE ROLE OF COURTS AND LAW**

&

Reading: N&M. Chapter 1. “Law, Courts and Politics”

*“Future of the Supreme Court” http://www.cqpress.com/InContext*

8/26

N&M. Chapter 1. “Law, Courts and Politics”

**Week 2** 8/29

**I. INSTITUTIONS OF LAW**

&


9/2

Video #1 “Threats to Judicial Independence”

**Week 3** 9/5

**Labor Day—No Class**
Structure and Organization of the Federal Judicial System
& Reading: N&M. Chapter 3. “Federal Courts”
9/9

Week 4
9/12 Structure and Organization of State Courts
& Reading: N&M Chapter 4. “State Courts”
9/14
9/16 II. INTERPRETERS OF THE LAW
& Lawyers
9/19 Reading: N&M: Chapter 5 “Lawyers and Legal Representation”

9/21 Video #2 (Lawyers)
& 9/23

Week 5
9/26 Exam #1

9/28 Federal Judges & Federal Judicial Selection
& Reading: N&M Chapter 6 “Judges” pp.179-190
9/30 “Should the Senate consider ideology in acting on judicial nominees?”
  *http://www.cqpress.com/incontext/SupremeCourt/cqr20010727_procon.html
  “Filibuster”
  *http://www.cqpress.com/incontext/SupremeCourt/filibuster.htm

Week 6
10/3 Guest Speaker Prof. Steven Wasby discusses the Ninth Circuit
10/5 State Judges and State Judicial Selection
& Reading: N&M Chapter 6 (continued) pp. 190-211
10/7 Video #3 (Judicial Elections)

Week 7
10/10 III. CONSUMERS OF LAW
Reading: N&M Chapter 7 “Mobilizing the Law: Litigants, Interest Groups, Court Cases and the Media”

10/12 IV. TRIAL COURTS
& Criminal Courts and Criminal Law

Week 9

10/19 Video #4 Three strikes Laws
&
10/21
Week 10  10/24  **Topics in Civil Law**  
10/26  Reading: *The Buffalo Creek Disaster* (all)

Week 11  10/31  **Juries and Trials**  
Reading: N&M, Chapter 12. “Trial”
Reading: Curriden, Mark. “Jury consultants are now common in courtrooms, but do they get results?” *(Infotrac)*
Reading: Dilworth, Donald C. “Jury Nullification: When Jurors leave the Law Behind.” *(Infotrac)*

11/2  Video #5 Jury Decision Making
&
11/4

Week 12  11/7  **Exam #2**

11/9  **V. APPELLATE REVIEW**  
Reading: N&M, Chapter 13 “The Appellate Process”

11/11  **Veteran's Day-No Class**

Week 13  11/14, 11/16  **The Supreme Court’s Agenda**  
&
11/18

Week 14  11/21  Video #6 The Supreme Court
&
11/23

11/25  **NO CLASS THANKSGIVING BREAK**

Week 15  11/28  **The Supreme Court’s Decisions**  
&  Reading: N&M Chapter 15. “The Supreme Court: The Justices and their Decisions.” Reading: Joseph A. Slobodzian.”Supreme Court uses public opinion to rule on execution of retarded.” *(Infotrac)*
11/30  **The Impact of Supreme Court Decisions**  
Reading: TBA

Week 16  12/5  **Exam #3**