Important Note: For those of students who have previously taken online classes, be forewarned. My class is unlike any online class you’ve taken before. It is essential that you read the Orientation Letter very carefully. If you don’t have the patience, maturity, and focus necessary to carefully read the Orientation Letter (and Syllabus), this is NOT the right class for you.

This course is completely online. All material related to the class is located on the class webpage. To get to the class webpage on Canvas, go to https://coc.instructure.com on the 1st day of class. Students who fail to do so may be dropped. The login for Canvas is your MyCanyons username (i.e., the first part of your MyCanyons email address) and your MyCanyons password. If you haven’t used – or want a refresher on – Canvas, please visit the guides. When you login to Canvas, you will see a link to POLISCI 150. To access the class webpage, click on the link.

When I designed this course, I wanted students to experience something similar to what happens in a face-to-face class. To do that, I videotaped all of my lectures in ten-minute segments. When I was done, there were over 100 videos on a variety of subjects related to American and California government. In many online classes, students do a lot of reading and then take an exam. In my class, you still have to read the textbook but you MUST also watch the lecture videos. Simply reading the textbook will not get the job done. And if you’re thinking, “I’ll just google stuff,” you’re mistaken.

Every semester, a couple of students think they are very clever and decide to answer the essay questions on my exams using information from sources other than my lectures videos. They must be hoping that I’m not going to notice. They are wrong. I have my own unique take on most subjects, especially those I include on the exam. When students rely on information from other sources, it is very, very obvious. It is important that you understand that if you answer a question using information from other sources, you will fail the class. Likewise, if you plagiarize material from other sources, you will not only fail the class but I will report you to the Dean of Student Services.

The news isn’t all bad, though. If you click here, you’ll see that my lecture videos aren’t horrendously boring, even for people who dread the idea of taking a political science course. I recorded some of the videos during actual lectures. I recorded others in different spots around campus. For example, I recorded some of them while standing next to the Pacific Arts Center on Rockwell Canyon Road. I also recorded some of them when I was sitting in my house, backyard, or garden. And I have an awesome garden that you’re going to want to see.
Along with the lecture videos, there is a required textbook that can be purchased at the COC Bookstore. It is a custom book, published specifically for College of the Canyons. You should have the textbook by the first day of class. The textbook includes two books in one:

We The People by Ginsberg, et. al. & Governing California by Anagnoson, et. al.
ISBN: 9780393600278

In the remainder of this Orientation Letter, I describe the structure of the class and what you’ll see when you access the class webpage at the beginning of the semester.

On the class webpage, most of the substantive material can be found by clicking on the “Modules” tab.

I: Syllabus: At the top of the class webpage, on the left hand side, click on “Syllabus.” When you do, it will open a page that includes the Orientation Letter (which you are reading), Syllabus and Syllabus Quiz. The Orientation Letter describes the structure of the class. The Syllabus provides details about grading, the course schedule, rules pertaining to plagiarism, etc. In order to avoid being dropped from the class, students must read the Syllabus and complete the Syllabus Quiz by Friday of the first week at 11:59PM. You can take the Syllabus Quiz as many times as necessary until you get 100%. I reserve the right to drop any student who fails to complete the Syllabus Quiz as instructed.

II: Discussion Boards: When you click on Modules, you will see three Discussion Boards that students can use to earn participation points.

1. Administrative Questions Discussion Board: If you have any questions pertaining to the structure or organization of the course, post them on this Discussion Board. If you do not receive a quick response, email me and let me know that you posted a question.

2. Current Events Discussion Board: Students may post questions and comments about current events on this board. Although I don’t require that students respond to one another, everyone should feel free to discuss all political matters, especially if they tie into the lecture material. Moreover, while I do not require that students be excessively polite, I do insist that students engage in civil discourse. Disagree strongly if you must but do so respectfully.

3. Reading Questions Discussion Board: For every chapter that you’re expected to read, I provide 25 “Reading Questions.” Students will be taking a number of quizzes on the readings. The quizzes will randomly select 10 of the Reading Questions. Unlike the essays on my exams, you should use the information in the textbook to answer the questions on the quizzes. If you are not sure of your answer to one of the Reading Questions, you can earn participation points by asking your colleagues for assistance. However, you may not simply ask them to provide you with the correct answer. You must identify the answer you believe is correct and provide your reasoning. Therefore, you should not post questions like, “What is the answer to Question 3 in Chapter 1?” If you want to ask about Question 3 in Chapter 1, you should explain which answer(s)
you think is correct and why. Students can also earn participation points by responding to questions. However, responses cannot simply identify the correct answer. For example, you should not post answers like, “The correct answer for Question 3 is D.” You must explain why a particular answer is correct. Alternatively, you can answer the question by directing the student to the place in the book that provides the relevant information. I will delete all comments that fail to meet these guidelines and they will NOT count towards your participation grade.

III: Sections: Below the Discussion Boards, you will see, I have divided the material into sections based on content. For example, the tab entitled “Section 1: Assessing Democracy,” addresses a number of issues pertaining to democracy in the United States. Most sections include five elements.

1. Lecture Notes: I provide lecture notes for each lecture. When you watch the lecture videos, you should have the lecture notes readily available. As you will see, there are numerous blank spaces in the lecture notes. You should be filling these areas as you watch the lecture videos. When I grade your exams, I look specifically to see if your answers include the information that should have been included in the blank spaces. So when you watch the videos, you have to pay attention and take good notes.

2. Lecture Videos: As noted above, you will be watching videos of me giving my regular lectures. By the time you're done watching the videos, you will have seen my wife, my incredible garden, how I react to bees, a campfire lecture (kind of spooky), some good jokes, some bad jokes, and other things. And you will also learn a great deal about American and California government.

   a. As I have noted previously, you cannot do well in this class without viewing the lecture videos. As you will see, 80% of the points on the exams are based on the information presented in the lecture videos. So while other classes encourage and reward students for doing outside research, this class does not. In fact, I discourage outside research. If your answers to the essay questions reflect a good understanding of the material in the textbook or any source other than my lectures, I will assume you did not watch the lecture videos and grade you accordingly. So be advised! You MUST watch the lecture videos in order to do well in this class. And you must use the examples I present in the lecture videos when explaining the concepts.

   b. Within the lecture notes, I indicate when one video ends and the next one begins. For example, at the beginning of the lecture notes on Assessing Democracy, you will see the following notation: Assessing Democracy.01. That indicates the point at which the first video begins. A little farther down in the lecture notes, you will see: Assessing Democracy.02. That refers to point at which the second video begins. These notations will allow you to determine where you are in the lecture notes at any given time. So, if you get tired of watching me – which will happen – you can take a break and know exactly where you are in the lecture notes. If this seems
unclear, it will make more sense once you open the lecture notes and begin watching the lecture videos.

3. **Lecture Discussion Boards:** Below the videos, you will find a link to the Lecture Discussion Board related to the content of the video. The goal of the Lecture Discussion Board is to encourage students to think critically about the material presented in the lecture videos. The truth is that most students do not put much effort into their posts. This is a mistake. I do not assign Lecture Discussion Boards as busy work. Research indicates that students learn and retain information best when they can connect new information to information they already possess. The Lecture Discussion Boards encourage students to do that. Students who do an excellent job on the Lecture Discussion Boards typically do very well on essay questions.

After each lecture, a student should post something on the appropriate Lecture Discussion Board that includes four components. Please number each component.

1) Identify at least one new or interesting thing you learned from the lecture videos.
2) Identify at least one thing you previously believed that the lecture videos confirmed.
3) Identify at least one thing you previously believed that you either no longer believe or have come to doubt.
4) Include any questions about material in the lecture videos that you did not understand or would like to have clarified. If you don’t have any questions, you can write, “I do not have any questions.”

4. **Reading Questions:** As noted above, for every chapter in the book that you will be reading, I have compiled a set of twenty-five multiple choice questions which I refer to as “Reading Questions,” since the questions pertain to the readings, not the lectures. You can access the Reading Questions by clicking on the tab. You should have a copy of the Reading Questions with you before you begin reading the assigned chapters. As you read the chapter, you should be able to answer the questions in order. If you are unsure about the answer to one of the Reading Questions, you can post a question on the Reading Questions Discussion Board.

5. **Chapter Quizzes:** Directly below the Reading Questions is a link to a Quiz on the chapter. For example, the link to the quiz on Chapter 1 is directly below the link to the Reading Questions for Chapter 1. To take the quiz, just click on the link. Be sure to have the answers to the Reading Questions close by when you do. You have twenty minutes to complete each quiz! And once you click on the link, the clock starts ticking and can’t be stopped.

a. For each quiz, Canvas will randomly select ten of the twenty-five Reading Questions. You get two attempts on every quiz and Canvas only records your highest score. So, even if you answer all ten questions correctly in your first attempt, there are at least two good reasons to take it a second time. First, since Canvas is highly unlikely to randomly select the same ten questions, taking the quiz a second time will give you an opportunity to see whether your answers to those
questions are correct. Second, since Canvas records your highest score, it cannot hurt your grade to take it a second time.

IV: Exams and Study Guides:

**Exams:** The two exams in this class will be taken online. To get to them, click on the Modules tab. They are listed below the sections covered by the exam. The due dates for the exams are listed in the Course Schedule on the syllabus. Each exam includes twenty multiple-choice questions, selected at random from the Reading Questions (2 points each), three short essays (20 points each), and two longer essays (50 points each). You have ninety minutes to complete each exam, so be sure to pace yourself.

Once you click on the exam, you have to answer the questions in the order they appear. The exams will be available for twenty-four hours. You MUST complete the exam within the twenty-four hour period. The following is very important! The essay questions on the exams are very similar to the questions on the study guide. If you do a good job completing the study guide before the exam and provide complete, structured, and detailed answers, it will help you on the exams. In fact, if you do a good enough job on the study guide, you may be able to copy and paste some of your answers directly from the study guide to the exam.

When I teach a topic, I almost always use the same approach. I begin with a **definition** of the topic or concept. Often times, the definition doesn’t make sense because it’s introducing a new concept. The next thing I do is **elaborate** on the definition. I go through the definition piece by piece and explain it in detail. Lastly, to ensure that you fully understand it, I provide some **examples** of the concept. When you are taking the exams, you should follow the same approach. Your answers should – in most cases – begin with a clear definition, followed by an elaboration or explanation of the definition, followed by an example. And be sure the example demonstrates your understanding of the concept. When you’re answering my essay questions, think of them as math problems. If you answer a math problem correctly but you don’t show how you arrived at the answer, you don’t get any points. The same is true for my essay questions. You have to show your work.

**Study Guides:** In the tab for Exams 1 and 2, I have posted study guides for each. I strongly encourage you to complete the study guides. They will come in very handy when answering the essay questions on the exams. One of the things you’re going to find is that the questions on the Study Guides are very similar to the questions on the exams. So if you’ve done an excellent job of answering the questions on the study guide, you’re going to be in a good position to do well on the exams.

**V: Grades:** This section of Canvas allows you to check on your grades. For the purposes of the exams, if you click on the numerical score, you can also see my comments on your exams. I encourage you to look over my comments after Exam 1. Hopefully, they will provide you with clues on what you can do to improve your grade on the next exam. If you have any questions about my comments, feel free to email me.
If you’re trying to figure out your standing in the class, please keep a couple of things in mind. First, the syllabus quiz does not count as part of your grade. Second, there are fifteen chapter quizzes assigned over the course of the semester. When calculating your final grade, I will drop the three lowest quiz scores. I expect you to participate on all sixteen Discussion Boards (i.e., Sections 1 through 15 plus the Current Events Discussion Board). There are essentially three grades a student can earn on the Discussion Boards: Excellent, Acceptable, and Unacceptable. Students who give serious thought to the material presented in the lecture videos – regardless of how much knowledge they possessed prior to the class – will receive the maximum number of points. Students who post comments that demonstrate a lack of understanding of the material presented in the lecture videos – or leave me with the impression that they didn’t view all of the lecture videos – will receive a minimal number of points (50% or less). Everyone else will around 75% of the participation points. I do not keep a running tally of the participation points. When it comes time to calculate your participation score, I will randomly select ten Discussion Boards and grade them. In most cases, they will not happen until the end of the class.

As a result, THE GRADE ASSIGNED TO YOU IN CANVAS IS NOT AN ACCURATE ASSESSMENT OF YOUR STANDING IN THE CLASS. To calculate your grade you need to (1) subtract the score from your Syllabus Quiz, (2) drop your three lowest quiz scores, (3) estimate your participation grade, and (4) add in your exam scores.

Note: If a student is close to the next highest grade and has a high participation score, I will often give them the higher grade. If a student is close to the next highest grade and has a low participation score, I have never given them the higher grade.

Are you still reading?

It is important to understand that this online course is not easy. In fact, I think this class is more demanding than my face-to-face courses. To do well in this class, students must be computer and internet savvy. This class requires students to be comfortable in an online environment. Perhaps most importantly, to do well in this class, you must be disciplined enough to view over 100 lecture videos. This can be challenging for new and returning students. Distance Learning has created a comprehensive list of Computer Skills Tutorials that may be useful in developing the necessary skills.

If you have any additional questions, feel free to e-mail me at phil.gussin@canyons.edu. Please allow me a few days to respond. If I don’t get back to you within a few days, feel free to send a reminder. I hope you enjoy the course. Good luck.

If you did not read this Orientation Letter very carefully and skimmed down to the bottom to see how it ended, this class is NOT right for you. I recommend that you drop it. Seriously.

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