

PS 202

State and Local Government in the United States

General Description

Course Overview and Objectives

As you will discover as you proceed in this course, state and local governments have changed a great deal in recent history. Once written off by many people as unnecessary at best, states have made a comeback. Although state and local governments face difficult problems, their capability to govern has increased substantially. Today, many political observers feel that the action is not in Washington, DC, but in localities and state capitals.

Why study state and local government?

One reason to study this topic is because the politics of state and local government is undergoing such massive change. Another reason is the large role these governments play in policies that affect us in our daily lives. For example, states and localities are responsible for almost all of the spending in the United States on elementary and secondary education; states and localities are also responsible for most of the highway spending in the nation. These levels of government have the primary responsibility for public safety. As an indicator of their importance, approximately one in five workers in the United States works for a state or local government.

A major objective of this course is for you to better understand state and local politics—how and why it works as it does. *To do this successfully, you must be able to read and analyze information effectively—to pick up key points, understand them, and apply what you have learned.* Sometimes this will be difficult, sometimes relatively easy. At the end of the course you should be able to use what you have learned to better

understand state and local politics as it involves you in the real world.

The course will consist of fourteen lessons that each cover a general topic. Each lesson is composed of objectives that will emphasize key topics, a brief written discussion (roughly equivalent to a lecture), assigned reading, and a written assignment. Each discussion, besides giving a broad overview of the subject, will also serve to focus your study. Key terms will be highlighted in the discussion and any **additional** key terms from the reading will be listed. Throughout the discussion sections, you will find questions or suggestions designed to stimulate your thinking. Being creative in your mental responses will enhance your understanding of the subject matter. Some discussions are much longer than others. This usually means that an especially important topic is being covered. (Some topics are well covered by the text and require little additional material.)

Readings

There are two sets of readings for this course. The textbook is Bowman and Kearney, *State and Local Government* (7th edition, Houghton Mifflin, 2008), and references in this course manual to “the text” refer to it. The second set of readings is found in *Annual Editions: State and Local Government* (14th edition, 2009), a collection of articles assembled for state and local politics courses. For any given subject, the text provides a general overview. *Annual Editions* articles illuminate material covered by the text and discussions through examples or by providing more detail. Some of the *Annual Editions* articles are in the form of an argument. The author has a key point or points to make and provides evidence to support that case. As you read these articles, try to identify what the author is trying to argue and then follow along with his or her reasoning. You should always think critically, as an author may or may not be convincing. You should be able to connect all of the reading for each lesson and understand how it fits together into a coherent package. Outlining a topic is probably the best way to understand the material and make studying for the final exam easier.

Both books can be ordered from Friday Center Books & Gifts by using the book order form found in this course manual or online at <https://s4.its.unc.edu/HigherGrounds>.

Written Assignments

Each assignment will consist of questions based upon the discussion and the readings. Some questions will be fairly easy, requiring you to review material you have learned. For such questions, *it is important that you answer the question in your own words*. Other questions will require some more thought on your part; you may have to make an argument of your own to answer the question. Whichever side of the argument you take, always strive to make your case as convincing as possible. There is no set length required to answer any particular question but most questions are designed to be answered in approximately one double-spaced, typed page. Some will demand more writing than others. Be aware that questions may require you to draw upon material from earlier lessons. If you do not understand a question, do not answer it until you do. Ask the instructor to clarify, if necessary.

Please **type** your answers if at all possible; otherwise, be careful to write legibly. With the exception of the final exam, all work in the course is open book. Feel free to look back at materials as necessary. You may use outside materials in your answer, but please indicate what sources you have used.

Grading and Final Exam

The final exam is closed book and counts as 30 percent of your grade. It will consist of essays, short answers, and identification of important terms. **You must pass the final in order to pass the course.** The best way to prepare for the final is to review the material that was stressed in the course: subjects that were given a lot attention in the discussions and the readings, suggested key terms, and material covered in assignments. Preparing outlines and taking adequate notes as you proceed is the best way to keep up with and remember course material.

A Final Word

Despite the fact that you will not have the benefit of classroom contact with the instructor for this course, we can

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interact with each other. The instructor will be providing feedback on your work in the form of grades and comments and you should feel free to ask questions about the discussions, readings, or written assignments. Good luck with the course!