TERM PAPER QUESTIONS

These papers are designed to make you think, not to merely regurgitate other material. This is to be a thought-driven paper. I want you to present your own arguments. Some research may well be necessary, but the objective of this assignment is to make you construct a logical, coherent and persuasive argument based upon empirical evidence. This is a skill you will need in your careers if you are to be successful.

The best places to research your papers will probably be newspapers (such as the Washington Post, New York Times etc.), magazines (such as Time, Newsweek, the National Journal, Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report etc.), and the Internet (use the various search engines, there are some great sites. But be careful! Make sure your source is reputable). Many authors have written books on these subjects as well. You can use parenthetical references (with a citation page), endnotes or footnotes when you reference other people’s work. If you cite from the Internet, you must give me the URL. You may use the first person. Please signify which question you are answering. There is no need for a title or a title page.

Please feel free to contact me as you write your essay. I can help you find sources and to think about your argument. When you write, make sure your argument is backed up with evidence. Why do you say what you say? Don’t use generalizations—such as “the media are not interested in a discussion of substantive issues, only scandal”—without providing evidence to bolster your claim. The more systematic (and less anecdotal) your evidence, the better—although colorful and appropriate anecdotes can make the paper more interesting.

Also, please please proofread! No matter how long students have to do their paper (you get several months), I always receive assignments riddled with spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. These inevitably hurt the author’s ability to get the point across and, besides, I want to reward good writing. If you want to be successful in life, you need to learn to write well.

A final tip: Don’t just sit down at your computer and start to write. Plan your essay by listing the points you wish to make and arranging them in an order that makes sense. Then fill out these points and connect them in a manner that allows the essay to read smoothly.

You should know that plagiarism will not be tolerated. Software is now available that allows me to detect whether a paper has been downloaded from the Internet or taken from any other source. Please see the syllabus for the course’s academic honesty policy.

Answers should be double-spaced in 12 point font with 1 inch margins and no less than four pages and no more than five pages long. The papers are due on August 2. You will be deducted a grade for each day (including weekends and holidays) that the assignment is late (i.e. a B+ becomes a B etc.).
Do one of the following questions:

1. “Despite President Obama’s victory in 2008, the United States still has severe racial problems. Wherever one looks, the country is split along racial lines. Whites constantly surpass blacks when it comes to income, employment, and educational attainment figures. Blacks constantly surpass whites when it comes to single-parent family, infant mortality, and crime figures. Whites call affirmative action reverse discrimination. Blacks call actions of the federal government racist.”

   Discuss this statement. Do you agree with the author that the United States is a racially polarized society, or do you think that he has overexaggerated America’s racial problems? Why do you believe this? Be sure to use evidence to back up your argument, including from your observations of the 2008 presidential campaign.

   What about the future? Is the United States set for a future of racial harmony or violent division? Why have you chosen your particular outcome?

   Finally, if you believe that America has racial problems, explain how you would try to remedy them if you were president. If you do not believe America has racial problems, what do you see as the biggest threat to race relations in this country?

2. Divided government—that is, split-party control of Congress and the presidency—is the norm in this country. Between 1969 and 2010, we have experienced divided government around 80% of the time.

   Many political scientists argue that divided government leads to “gridlock” and the government cannot seem to get anything done. Others argue that divided government is not problematic and that “gridlock” can occur during unified government.

   What do you think causes divided government? That is, why do many voters prefer to send members of one party to represent them in Congress and members of the other party to be their presidents?

   What do you think are the consequences of divided government? Need divided government result in gridlock or can it produce important legislation? Explain your answer and use examples to illustrate your argument.

3. Since 1991 and the Clarence Thomas hearings when a prospective Supreme Court justice was accused of sexual harassment, many American women have become politically mobilized, believing that they are underrepresented in the political system. The result has been the proliferation of feminist interest groups and political organizations and a host of new women in Congress (there are now 70 in the House and 16 in the Senate) and the cabinet.

   By examining recent developments in American politics, explain what is behind this feminist energy. Is the discontent justified or are women and their interests adequately represented in the political system?

   In the second part of your paper answer this question: Do you think having more women in politics will make a difference? Would it make a difference in the way Washington works? Would it make a difference in the types of policies Washington produces? Why? Why not?

4. “It’s like running a marathon. I ran a marathon in 1993 and it just requires patience and discipline and focus, and this is Mile 6.”
Examine presidential selection. Without discussing in too much detail the events of the 2008 race, look at how we choose presidents. Discuss both the nomination and general election processes. What is wrong with them? Are they fair or unfair? Democratic or undemocratic? Do we get the best candidates in November or not? Do the processes provide us with the best presidents or not? How would you change the selection process if at all?

5. Whether we like it or not, the media are extremely influential actors in the political process. For most of us, they are our only windows on the political world and we are looking through them more and more frequently. Just about every American household has a television and new news shows, television stations, and Internet sites seem to be popping up all over the place.

   Define what you think is the proper role of the media in the political process of our democratic country. How do you think the media should cover elections? How do you think the media should cover government?

   How well do you think the media of today stand up to your definition? What do they do right? What do they do wrong? In your assessment of today’s media, be sure to direct your comments especially to (1) network television news, (2) talk radio, (3) national newspapers and (4) the Internet. Please provide specific examples.

6. “The United States has a two-party system. The Green and Libertarian parties don’t phase me. The Democrats and Republicans will control American politics well into the next century.”

   Why is it that the United States has a two-party system? What is it about the political system that allows Republicans and Democrats to maintain control? What is it about the two parties themselves that allows them to maintain their control?

   Do you think that such a third party can be successful in the future? What types of issues and viewpoints would a new party likely espouse?

7. With the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy had reached a crossroads. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, U.S. action, whether it be in Guatemala or the Congo, was shaped solely by the communist threat. In 1991 that threat dissipated.

   September 11, 2001 marked the beginning of a new U.S. foreign policy designed to root out terrorism. What should this new foreign policy look like? Where would it call for U.S. intervention abroad? Is it purely military, or should economic strategies (trade, aid) be part of it? How would it be linked to domestic policies? In your answer be sure to give specific examples and show real-world applications of your policy.

8. After the sudden and dramatic resignation of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, it is you who have been asked by the president to become the next justice of the Supreme Court. The first thing that the Attorney General has told you to do is to prepare a memo for the Senate Judiciary Committee describing your judicial philosophy.

   Write this memo. In it, be sure to describe, in detail, what you think is the appropriate way for a Supreme Court justice to interpret the Constitution. Given the role of the federal judiciary in the American system, should a judge be active or passive in his/her interpretation?

   You may also wish to look at controversial issues (abortion, the rights of criminal
defendants etc.) and discuss what you think the Constitution says about them. Are there pieces of legislation, political actions, current cases or parts of the Constitution that may also help clarify your personal jurisprudence?

9. What do you think is the number one domestic policy problem facing the United States today? Why is this problem so important? That is, (1) explain that the policy is an important issue (it should not, therefore, be price supports for dairy farmers) and (2) that the problem is large (you should not, therefore, be worried about a problem arising from an important issue that costs taxpayers $5 million a year or adversely affects just 50,000 Americans).

    What can be done to fix the problem? Please be fairly specific when discussing your solution. You should, for example, if relevant, talk about budgetary aspects, how your solution would be administered, short- and long-term affects on societal behavior etc. etc..