PAPER QUESTIONS

You must answer three of the following questions, one for each section. Answers should be double-spaced in 12 point font with 1 inch margins and approximately five pages long.

These papers—as with all we are trying to do—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, arguments you formulate largely from watching the lectures and reading the assigned books. 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.

You can use parenthetical references (with a citation page), endnotes or footnotes if you reference other people’s work. 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. When you write, make sure your argument is backed up with evidence. Why do you say what you say? Don’t use generalizations without providing evidence to bolster your claim. The more systematic (and less anecdotal) your evidence, the better.

Also, please please proofread! No matter how long students have to do their paper, 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. If a student is found to have plagiarized, they will fail the course and I will turn them over to the university. (See also my statement of plagiarism in the syllabus). In addition, please note the other assignment policies on the syllabus.

Here are the questions:

SECTION I paper (due February 9, do one only):

1. What did the Framers of the Constitution decide to do with the new federal government? Describe, in detail, their thinking when it came to the structure, personnel, and powers of the legislative and executive branches? Why did they decide to do what they did?

2. Why is it that we say that some presidents are more or less powerful than others? Clearly, of course, Bill Clinton is much more powerful than John Adams, our second president, could ever hope to have been. Yet why is it that we say that Ronald Reagan was more powerful than his
immediate successor, George Bush? That is, what was it about Reagan the president that made him more powerful than Bush the president? (You need not talk about Bush and Reagan specifically, just understand that successive presidents may wield different amounts of power). In your answer be sure to refer to the thoughts of at least two of the following: Neustadt, Skowronek, Schlesinger.

3. “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.”

-Gov. George W. Bush speaking about the presidential election process after the Iowa caucuses.

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? Please use examples.

SECTION II paper (due March 20, do one only):

1. Why do House incumbents tend to win reelection? What is it about the nature of House elections and House politics that has allowed reelection success rates to sometimes exceed 95% in recent years?

   Re-election success rates for the Senate are typically lower than in the House. Why is it that incumbent Senators find it more difficult to hold on to their jobs than incumbent House members? What is it about Senate elections that makes them more competitive than House elections?

   A number of political scientists argue that congressional elections are becoming increasingly “nationalized” and less about local factors and the personal characteristics of candidates. In the last part of your essay, very briefly look at the results of recent congressional elections and suggest whether you agree there has been such a nationalizing effect.

2. The Bush administration, although galvanized behind a war on terrorism, has had its internal disputes over foreign and domestic policy. We frequently heard about disputes between the White House and State Department, for example.

   Why is it that politically-appointed cabinet-level officials and members of the White House staff can often be in conflict with each other? Moreover, why do they sometimes fail to carry out the president’s wishes, and why do they sometimes disagree with him?

   Why are rifts more likely to occur between the president and cabinet secretaries than the president and the White House staff? What is it about the selection and political roles of cabinet secretaries that makes them often behave differently from members of the White House staff?

3. What are the three theoretical perspectives of the role of committees in the legislative process? Explain each theoretical approach and provide evidence to bolster each one. Which of the three do you think most accurately describes the role of committees in the contemporary Congress?
Explain yourself. Do you think that more than one theory can be useful in explaining the role of committees today? If so, explain the situations (that is, the chamber, the issues etc.) in which a theory is better than the others.

SECTION III paper (due April 24, do one only):

1. What are the major differences in the legislative processes and institutional rules of the House of Representatives and the Senate? What are the causes of these differences? What is the impact of these differences on member behavior? What do these differences mean to the majority leaderships and party organizations in each of the respective chambers?

   Suppose that you were authoring a constitution for a newly democratizing country. After reading several books, you decided to go to the United States to study Congress since you believe it provides the best model for your country's new legislature. However, after you arrive in Washington, you realize that the House and Senate are quite different. As you have been charged with creating a unicameral legislature, you must pick only one chamber as a blueprint. Which would you choose? Why? What is it about the House or Senate that makes it the chamber that better displays the qualities that you are looking for in a legislature?

2. Members of Congress make thousands of decisions during their tenures on Capitol Hill. Committee assignment requests, how and when to support their party, how to vote on an issue in committee and on the floor etc. Sometimes, their decisions seem to be at odds with one another. But for the most part, political scientists suggest that these decisions are consistent, linked by an interest or a set of interests, shaped by certain pressures and encouraged by certain incentives.

   What makes members of Congress come to the decisions that they come to? Why do they choose particular committee assignments and vote in certain manners? In your answer, you may wish to identify one or a small number of interests, pressures, or incentives that shape member behavior, but make sure that you understand that this is a fairly complex process. Which of these interests, pressures, or incentives is most critical? Which are less important to the final decision members come to?

   Clearly, there will be occasions when one such interest, pressure, or incentive does not play a role and others when it is the most important factor. With this in mind, and as part of your answer, outline examples, hypothetical or actual, where you believe each of the interests, pressures, or incentives that you have described is critical to the content of the member’s final decision. What role do the other interests, pressures, or incentives play in each of your examples?

3. What is congressional oversight? Describe, in some detail, the different techniques of oversight Congress uses to check the executive branch. Why does Congress oversee the other elected branch of the federal government? Under what conditions do you think congressional oversight activity is intensified? Do you think the nature of congressional oversight has changed in the past quarter century? In what ways?