

AP U.S. GOVERNMENT & POLITICS CRAM SHEET

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EXAM FORMAT & SCORING

Section	Details	Weight
Section I: MCQ	55 questions, 80 minutes. Stimulus-based (texts, maps, charts, graphs, infographics). No penalty for guessing.	50%
Section II: FRQ	4 free-response questions, 100 minutes. (1) Concept Application (3 pts), (2) Quantitative Analysis (4 pts), (3) SCOTUS Comparison (4 pts), (4) Argument Essay (6 pts).	50%
Score Estimate: ~28 MCQ correct + solid FRQs = 3. ~38 MCQ + good FRQs = 4. ~44 MCQ + strong FRQs = 5. ANSWER EVERY QUESTION.		

UNIT 1: FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY (15-22%)

Core Principles

- Popular sovereignty** — government power derives from the consent of the governed
- Limited government** — Constitution restricts what government can do (enumerated powers)
- Separation of powers** — legislative, executive, judicial branches with distinct functions
- Checks and balances** — each branch can limit the others (veto, judicial review, override, impeachment, confirmation)
- Federalism** — power divided between national and state governments
- Republicanism** — elected representatives govern on behalf of the people

Types of Powers in Federalism

- Enumerated (expressed)** — explicitly listed in Constitution (e.g., coin money, declare war, regulate interstate commerce)
- Implied** — derived from Necessary and Proper Clause (Art. I, Sec. 8, Cl. 18) — aka "Elastic Clause"
- Reserved** — belong to states via 10th Amendment (e.g., education, marriage laws, intrastate commerce)
- Concurrent** — shared by both levels (taxing, building roads, establishing courts)

Key Clauses

- Supremacy Clause (Art. VI)** — federal law trumps state law when in conflict
- Commerce Clause (Art. I, Sec. 8)** — Congress regulates interstate commerce; massive expansion of federal power
- Full Faith & Credit (Art. IV)** — states must honor other states' public acts and records
- Necessary & Proper Clause** — Congress can make laws "necessary and proper" to execute enumerated powers

Fiscal Federalism

- Categorical grants** — federal \$ for specific purpose with strings attached
- Block grants** — federal \$ for general area, states decide specifics (preferred by conservatives)
- Mandates** — federal requirements on states, sometimes unfunded
- Revenue sharing** — federal tax \$ distributed to states with few restrictions

Ratification Debate

Group	Position
Federalists	Supported Constitution. Wanted strong national government. Large republic prevents faction tyranny. Hamilton, Madison, Jay wrote <i>Federalist Papers</i> .
Anti-Federalists	Opposed Constitution. Feared tyranny without Bill of Rights. Wanted strong state govts. Brutus argued large republic threatens liberty. Won Bill of Rights.

UNIT 2: INTERACTIONS AMONG BRANCHES OF GOV'T (25-36%)

Congress (Article I)

- House:** 435 members, 2-yr terms, initiates revenue bills, impeaches, closer to people. Leader: Speaker of the House (most powerful member of Congress).
- Senate:** 100 members, 6-yr terms, confirms appointments, ratifies treaties (2/3), tries impeachments. Leader: VP (tiebreaker), Majority Leader (sets agenda).
- Filibuster** — Senate only, unlimited debate to delay/block. **Cloture** needs 60 votes to end it.
- Committee system** — standing committees (permanent), select/joint/conference. Bills die in committee most often.
- How a bill becomes law:** Intro → Committee → Floor debate → Other chamber → Conference committee (if needed) → Both chambers vote → President signs/vetoes.
- Discharge petition** — 218 House members can force a bill out of committee.
- Logrolling** = trading votes. **Pork barrel** = directing \$ to home district. **Rider** = unrelated amendment to bill.

The Presidency (Article II)

- Formal powers:** Commander-in-chief, veto, pardon, appoint judges/ambassadors (with Senate), make treaties (2/3 Senate), State of the Union
- Informal powers:** Executive orders, executive agreements, signing statements, bully pulpit, agenda-setting, party leader, bargaining with Congress
- Executive orders** — directives that carry force of law; can be overturned by next president, Congress, or courts
- War Powers Resolution (1973)** — president must notify Congress within 48 hrs of deploying troops; must withdraw in 60 days without congressional approval
- Bureaucracy:** Cabinet departments, independent agencies (EPA, NASA), independent regulatory commissions (FCC, SEC), government corporations (USPS, Amtrak)
- Iron triangles** = Congress committee + interest group + bureaucratic agency. **Issue networks** = looser, broader coalitions on policy.

The Judiciary (Article III)

- Judicial review** — established in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803); power to declare laws unconstitutional
- Federal court structure:** District courts (trial) → Circuit Courts of Appeals → Supreme Court (9 justices, life tenure)
- Judicial philosophies:** **Judicial activism** (broader interpretation, willing to overturn) vs. **Judicial restraint** (narrow interpretation, defer to legislature, stare decisis)
- Originalism** = interpret Constitution as written. **Living Constitution** = adapt meaning to modern context.
- Stare decisis** = "let the decision stand"; respect precedent. Courts can overturn but rarely do.
- Confirmation process:** President nominates → Senate Judiciary Committee hearings → full Senate vote (simple majority)
- Checks on the Court:** constitutional amendment, new legislation, appointment power, jurisdiction limits, impeachment

UNIT 3: CIVIL LIBERTIES & CIVIL RIGHTS (13-18%)

Civil Liberties vs. Civil Rights

- Civil liberties** = protections FROM government (Bill of Rights: speech, religion, press, etc.)
- Civil rights** = protections BY government (equal treatment: 14th Amendment, Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act)

Key Amendments for Liberties

- 1st Amendment:** Religion (Establishment Clause = no state religion / Free Exercise Clause = right to practice), Speech, Press, Assembly, Petition. Speech NOT protected: true threats, incitement to imminent lawless action, obscenity, defamation.
- 2nd Amendment:** Right to bear arms. *McDonald v. Chicago* incorporated it to states.
- 4th Amendment:** No unreasonable searches/seizures. Requires warrants with probable cause. Exclusionary rule = illegally obtained evidence excluded.
- 5th Amendment:** Grand jury, no double jeopardy, no self-incrimination (Miranda rights), due process, eminent domain (just compensation).
- 6th Amendment:** Right to speedy/public trial, impartial jury, confront witnesses, counsel (*Gideon*).
- 8th Amendment:** No excessive bail/fines, no cruel and unusual punishment.

Incorporation Doctrine

14th Amendment Due Process Clause — used to apply (incorporate) Bill of Rights protections to STATE governments through **selective incorporation**. Not all rights have been incorporated. This is how SCOTUS extended federal protections to state actions.

Key Civil Rights Concepts

- 14th Amendment Equal Protection Clause** — no state shall deny equal protection of the laws. Basis for desegregation, gender equality, marriage equality.
- Strict scrutiny** = highest standard; gov must show compelling interest (race, national origin, religion)
- Intermediate scrutiny** = must be substantially related to important gov interest (gender)
- Rational basis** = lowest; must be rationally related to legitimate gov interest (age, disability)
- Affirmative action:** Can consider race as ONE factor in college admissions (Grutter 2003, but note Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard 2023 effectively ended race-conscious admissions).
- Voting rights:** 15th (race), 19th (sex), 24th (no poll tax), 26th (18+ vote). Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned literacy tests.

UNIT 4: AMERICAN POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES & BELIEFS (10-15%)

Liberal vs. Conservative

Issue	Liberal (Left/Democrat)	Conservative (Right/Republican)
Economy	More regulation, higher taxes on wealthy, safety net programs	Free market, lower taxes, less regulation, smaller government
Social	Pro-choice, support gun control, LGBTQ+ rights, environmental regulation	Pro-life, gun rights (2A), traditional values, states' rights
Criminal Justice	Rehabilitation focus, oppose death penalty, reform policing	Tough on crime, support death penalty, back law enforcement
Healthcare	Government-provided/expanded coverage (ACA)	Market-based, less government involvement
Immigration	Path to citizenship, protect DACA/dreamers	Strict enforcement, secure borders, merit-based

Other Key Ideologies

- Libertarian** = minimal government in BOTH economic AND social issues (socially liberal, economically conservative)
- Populist** = government active in BOTH economic AND social regulation
- Moderate/centrist** = mix of liberal and conservative views

Political Socialization

Factors that shape political beliefs: **Family** (strongest predictor), education, religion, race/ethnicity, gender, income, region, media, peer groups, major life events.

Polling & Public Opinion

- Random sampling** = everyone has equal chance of selection (valid); **Sampling error** = +/- margin
- Flaws:** leading questions, selection bias, low response rate, small sample size
- Scientific polls vs. straw polls** (unscientific, self-selected)

UNIT 5: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION (20-27%)

Voting & Elections

- Voter turnout factors:** education (strongest predictor), age, income, race, civic duty, efficacy, registration laws, election type
- Linkage institutions:** parties, interest groups, elections, media — connect people to government
- Winner-take-all / single-member districts** → reinforces **two-party system** (Duverger's Law)
- Electoral College:** 538 total, 270 to win. Most states winner-take-all. Small states overrepresented. Can win presidency without popular vote.
- Primary types:** open (any voter), closed (registered party only), semi-closed, caucuses
- Gerrymandering:** drawing district lines for partisan advantage. **Packing** = concentrate opponents in one district. **Cracking** = split opponents across districts. *Shaw v. Reno* = racial gerrymandering is suspect.

Political Parties

- Functions: recruit candidates, mobilize voters, organize government, develop platforms
- Party realignment** = major shift in party coalitions (e.g., 1960s Southern realignment)
- Divided government** = different parties control branches → gridlock
- Third parties: rarely win but raise issues, can be spoilers. Barriers: ballot access, debate rules, winner-take-all

Interest Groups & PACs

- Lobbying** = direct contact with officials. **Grassroots lobbying** = mobilize public to pressure officials.
- PACs** = donate directly to candidates (\$5,000 max per candidate per election)
- Super PACs** = unlimited independent expenditures, NO direct coordination with candidates (*Citizens United*)
- Free rider problem** = people benefit from group efforts without contributing

Media

- Agenda-setting** = media decides WHAT issues get attention (not what to think, but what to think ABOUT)
- Framing** = HOW an issue is presented affects perception
- Horse-race journalism** = focus on who's winning, not policy substance
- Social media: direct candidate-voter communication, viral content, echo chambers, misinformation challenges

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15 REQUIRED SUPREME COURT CASES (MUST KNOW ALL)

Case	Ruling & Significance
Marbury v. Madison (1803)	Established judicial review — the Supreme Court can declare acts of Congress unconstitutional. Foundation of judicial power. Chief Justice Marshall asserted the Court as final interpreter of the Constitution.
McCulloch v. Maryland (1819)	Congress has implied powers under the Necessary and Proper Clause (creating a national bank is constitutional). States cannot tax the federal government. Expanded federal power over states. Supremacy Clause reinforced.
Schenck v. United States (1919)	Free speech can be limited if it creates a "clear and present danger" (later refined to "imminent lawless action" in Brandenburg). Upheld Espionage Act conviction. Speech is NOT absolute.
Brown v. Board of Education (1954)	Overtured Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). Racial segregation in public schools violates the 14th Amendment Equal Protection Clause . "Separate but equal" is inherently unequal. Landmark civil rights decision.
Baker v. Carr (1962)	Federal courts CAN rule on redistricting/reapportionment issues (it is a justiciable question, not purely political). Established "one person, one vote" principle. Led to more equal legislative districts.
Engel v. Vitale (1962)	School-sponsored prayer in public schools violates the 1st Amendment Establishment Clause . Government cannot compose or mandate prayers. Separation of church and state in schools.
Gideon v. Wainwright (1963)	6th Amendment right to counsel applies to states (incorporated via 14th Amendment). States must provide attorneys to defendants who cannot afford one in felony cases. Created public defender system.
Tinker v. Des Moines (1969)	Students do NOT shed their 1st Amendment rights at the schoolhouse gate. Wearing black armbands as political protest is protected symbolic speech. Schools can only restrict speech that causes substantial disruption .
New York Times Co. v. United States (1971)	Government cannot use prior restraint (censorship before publication) to block publication of the Pentagon Papers. Heavy presumption against prior restraint. Strengthened freedom of the press .
Wisconsin v. Yoder (1972)	Amish families' Free Exercise Clause rights allow them to pull children from school after 8th grade. State's interest in education does not override 1st Amendment religious freedom in this case. Limits compulsory education laws.
Roe v. Wade (1973)	Right to privacy (implied by 14th Amendment) protects a woman's right to an abortion. Established trimester framework. Note: Overtured by Dobbs v. Jackson (2022) , returning abortion regulation to states. Still tested as a required case.
Shaw v. Reno (1993)	Racial gerrymandering (drawing district lines based predominantly on race) is subject to strict scrutiny under the 14th Amendment Equal Protection Clause. Bizarrely shaped districts based on race are constitutionally suspect.
United States v. Lopez (1995)	First case in 60 years to limit Congress's Commerce Clause power . Gun-Free School Zones Act exceeded Congress's authority — carrying a gun near a school is not economic activity. Reinforced federalism and limits on national power.
McDonald v. Chicago (2010)	2nd Amendment right to bear arms is incorporated to the states via the 14th Amendment Due Process Clause. City handgun bans are unconstitutional. Extended <i>District of Columbia v. Heller</i> (2008) to states.
Citizens United v. FEC (2010)	Political spending by corporations and unions is protected 1st Amendment free speech . Government cannot restrict independent political expenditures. Led to rise of Super PACs and unlimited independent spending in elections.

EXAM TIP FRQ #3 (SCOTUS Comparison) will give you a NON-required case and ask you to compare it to one of these 15. Know HOW the cases connect by constitutional principle, NOT just facts.

KEY AMENDMENTS TO KNOW

1st Speech, religion, press, assembly, petition	14th Due process + equal protection (to states); citizenship clause; incorporation
2nd Right to bear arms	15th Vote not denied by race
4th No unreasonable search/seizure	19th Women's suffrage
5th Due process, self-incrimination, double jeopardy, eminent domain	22nd President limited to 2 terms
6th Right to counsel, speedy trial	24th No poll taxes
8th No cruel/unusual punishment	25th Presidential succession/disability
10th Reserved powers to states	26th Voting age lowered to 18

9 REQUIRED FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENTS

Document	Key Takeaway
The Declaration of Independence	Natural rights (life, liberty, pursuit of happiness). Social contract theory. Government derives power from consent of governed. Right to revolution if government fails.
The Articles of Confederation	First U.S. government. Too weak: no executive, no judiciary, no taxing power, no regulation of commerce, unanimous consent to amend. Showed need for stronger national government.
The Constitution	Supreme law. Establishes structure (3 branches), federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances. Article V amendment process. Supremacy Clause (Art. VI).
Federalist No. 10 (Madison)	Most tested document. Factions are inevitable but dangerous. Large republic is the cure: more diverse interests prevent any one faction from dominating. Representative government filters public opinion.
Federalist No. 51 (Madison)	Separation of powers and checks & balances prevent tyranny. "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition." Each branch must have means to resist encroachment by others. Compound republic (state + federal).
Brutus No. 1	Anti-Federalist argument. Large republic will become tyrannical. Necessary and Proper Clause + Supremacy Clause give too much power to national government. States will be swallowed up. Predicted judicial overreach.
Federalist No. 70 (Hamilton)	Argues for a strong, energetic, single executive. Unity in the executive provides decisiveness, accountability, and secrecy. Plural executive would be weak and divided.
Federalist No. 78 (Hamilton)	Judiciary is the "least dangerous branch" (no purse or sword). Argues for judicial review and life tenure for independence. Judges interpret, not make, law. Foundation for <i>Marbury v. Madison</i> .
Letter from a Birmingham Jail (MLK Jr.)	Argues for civil disobedience against unjust laws. Distinguishes just vs. unjust laws. Criticizes white moderates for inaction. Connects to 14th Amendment equal protection and social change through nonviolent protest.

FRQ STRATEGIES (50% OF YOUR SCORE)

FRQ #1: Concept Application (3 pts, ~20 min)

- Read the scenario/stimulus carefully. Identify the political concept being tested.
- Part A = identify/describe. Part B = explain. Part C = explain with connection to scenario.
- **Always reference the scenario directly.** Generic answers without connecting to the stimulus lose points.

FRQ #2: Quantitative Analysis (4 pts, ~20 min)

- You will get a chart, graph, table, or map. **USE SPECIFIC DATA** (numbers, percentages, trends).
- Describe a trend/pattern, explain cause or effect, and connect to a political principle.
- Do NOT just summarize the data — analyze and explain WHY the pattern exists using course concepts.

FRQ #3: SCOTUS Comparison (4 pts, ~20 min)

- Given a NON-required case. You MUST compare it to one of the 15 required cases.
- Identify the constitutional clause/principle, explain the ruling of BOTH cases, and describe how they are similar or different.
- **KEY** Connect through the SAME constitutional principle (e.g., both involve 1st Amendment free speech or 14th Amendment equal protection).

FRQ #4: Argument Essay (6 pts, ~40 min)

- **Thesis** (1 pt): Make a defensible claim that answers the prompt. Take a clear position.
- **Evidence** (3 pts): Use SPECIFIC evidence from the foundational documents and/or course concepts. You need at least 2 pieces of specific, relevant evidence, with one from the provided list.
- **Reasoning** (1 pt): Explain HOW your evidence supports your thesis. Don't just list facts.
- **Respond to opposing view** (1 pt): Address a counterargument and explain why your position is stronger.
- **TIP** Use this structure: Thesis → Evidence 1 + reasoning → Evidence 2 + reasoning → Counterargument + refutation → Conclusion.

MOST-TESTED CONCEPTS & COMMON TRAPS

Highest-Frequency Topics

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| • Federalism & federal vs. state power | • Congressional procedures (filibuster, committees) |
| • 1st Amendment (all 5 freedoms) | • Selective incorporation |
| • 14th Amendment (due process + equal protection) | • Electoral College mechanics |
| • Checks and balances examples | • Interest groups vs. political parties |
| • Judicial review & SCOTUS power | • Federalist 10 (factions & large republic) |

Common Exam Traps

- **TRAP** **Federalist 10 is NOT about separation of powers** — that is Federalist 51. Fed 10 = factions.
- **TRAP** **The Senate confirms appointments, NOT the House.** The House impeaches; the Senate tries/convicts.
- **TRAP** **Judicial review is NOT in the Constitution** — it was established by *Marbury v. Madison*.
- **TRAP** **The Bill of Rights originally only applied to the federal government.** The 14th Amendment + selective incorporation extended protections to states.
- **TRAP** **Executive orders are NOT legislation.** They can be overturned and do not require congressional approval.
- **TRAP** **Baker v. Carr is about justiciability, NOT the actual redistricting outcome.** It said courts CAN hear the case.
- **TRAP** **Citizens United did NOT remove all campaign finance limits.** It removed limits on independent expenditures by corporations/unions. Direct donation limits to candidates still exist.
- **TRAP** **Brutus 1 is Anti-Federalist** (opposes the Constitution). Don't confuse with the Federalist Papers.

LAST-MINUTE TIPS & TEST DAY STRATEGY

- **MCQs:** Eliminate 2 wrong answers first. Read ALL answer choices. Look for qualifiers ("always," "never," "most likely"). Answer every question — no penalty for guessing.
- **FRQs:** Label your parts (a, b, c). Write in complete sentences but be direct. Don't waste time on intros/conclusions (except the Argument Essay). **More detail = more points.**
- **Time management:** MCQ = ~1.5 min/question. FRQs 1-3 = ~20 min each. FRQ 4 = ~40 min. If stuck on MCQ, mark and move on.
- **Argument Essay:** Spend 5-8 minutes planning. An organized essay with clear evidence beats a longer, rambling one. ALWAYS address the counterargument — it is a free point.
- **Use political science vocabulary.** Say "selective incorporation" not "rights applied to states." Say "judicial review" not "the court can say no."
- **Connect everything to the Constitution.** Almost every answer ultimately ties back to a specific clause, amendment, or principle.

Night-before priority: (1) Memorize the 15 SCOTUS cases and their constitutional principles. (2) Know Federalist 10, 51, and Brutus 1 cold. (3) Review the amendments chart. (4) Practice one SCOTUS comparison FRQ. You've got this.