Pro-Seminar in American Government and Politics
Political Science 510

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SCOPE OF THE COURSE

This course is designed to introduce you to the field of American politics by intensively examining selected readings, almost exclusively articles drawn from leading research journals, in the various areas that comprise the field. No single course can hope to represent, or even sample in representative fashion, this rich and expansive field of study. The approach taken in this course is to identify some key research questions that are subjects of empirical study and (often) debate and to expose you to key readings that deal with each question. None of the readings is beyond the reach of first-quarter graduate students, although you may not be familiar with all the statistical or modeling techniques employed and the theory and conceptualization may be complex. Many of the selections are models of political science research, and you should come to a good understanding of why. My hope is that thinking about these readings will hone your analytic and conceptual skills and whet your appetite for more study of each area. The readings also reflect the wide variety of theoretical approaches, research designs, and research methodologies that characterizes empirical research in American politics, so that you can see for yourself how diverse are the ways of answering what I hope you will find are interesting questions in the field.

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING POLICIES

Beyond introducing the field of American politics, the course invites you to engage in intensive writing and seminar discussion around these topics and a final topic of your choosing. Its basic requirements are three:

1. Three essays of no more than 5 pages each that review all of the readings for a particular question in a class session (20% of the course grade). Each essay should include a clear and succinct summary of the important points (e.g., research question[s], theory and conceptualization, study design, analysis, and results) in each reading and a discussion of how -- and how well -- the readings address the research question posed in the syllabus (or another research question if you find it more relevant). These essays will be graded, but if you are dissatisfied with the grade you can do a fourth essay on the class session of your choice and substitute its grade for the grade on the lowest essay. The essays are due at the beginning of the class session when these readings are to be discussed; their grade will be reduced by 1/3 of a letter grade for each 24 hours they are late, beginning with the end of that class session.

2. Active and informed participation in seminar discussions (40% of the course grade). Each student should have sufficient familiarity with the readings for any session to be able to engage in discussion that day, whether or not an essay has been

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prepared on the topic. This requires careful study of each selection and considerable thought about how the readings for that day interrelate. It is the quality of participation, more than its quantity, which is important. Regular class attendance is a minimal expectation for a graduate seminar. Furthermore, 1 to 2 students will be designated as “discussion leaders” during each class session. It will be the responsibility of these leaders to facilitate the session’s discussion. How this is done is up to the leader’s discretion, though two effective methods are (1) arriving prepared with provocative questions and/or (2) by answering the “question of the day” (see below) in a provocative way. Each student’s participation grade will be partly determined by their performance during these leadership opportunities.

3. A 10-15 page critical literature analysis that traces the impact of one of the field’s classic articles or topics (worth 40% of the grade). A list of the classics from which to choose is provided at the end of the syllabus; with my permission, you may choose another classic article as your focus. Your task is to trace the principal work derived from this classic, addressing what its theoretical, methodological, and/or empirical legacy has been and why it has attained standing of a classic. To identify the “offspring” of the classic article you have selected, you can trace them “backwards” from the footnotes of a recent article using it or use the Social Science Citation Index online through the library. You should not try to include each and every derivative work in your analysis. Instead, you should focus on only the ones that make substantial use of the classic and only the most important of them, probably no more than a dozen in all.

ACADEMIC HONESTY

All of the work you do in this course is expected to be your own, done exclusively for this course. Cheating or plagiarism (using someone else’s words or ideas without proper citation) will not be tolerated. All cases of academic misconduct in the form of cheating or plagiarism will be reported to the University Committee on Academic Misconduct and handled according to University policy.

DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities are responsible for making their needs known to me, and seeking available assistance, at the first meeting of the course. Course materials may be made available in alternative formats upon request. If you need such materials, please inform me immediately.

SYLLABUS

The following pages contain the course syllabus. All readings contained in it are required. Most can be found on JSTOR or through the library. Others – e.g. book chapters – will be made available by the professor.
WEEK 1

*Introduction: Review of Course and the American Field*

WEEK 2

*What is the nature of representation?*


**Optional**


WEEK 3

*Why Is Voter Turnout in American Elections So Low?*

Despite an easing of the requirements for registration and voting, contemporary American turnout is well below the levels routinely achieved in other democracies and in nineteenth century America. Scholars have provided different explanations for turnout levels, which can be drawn upon to answer this perplexing question.


Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green. 2000. “The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls,
and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment.” *The American Political Science Review* 94: 653-663.

**Optional**

**What Motivates Political Activity?**
Even though political participation in the United States is more widespread than in most other democracies, only a minority of Americans engage in more demanding forms of political activity than voting. Contrasting explanations for why American citizens participate reflect the different theoretical approaches scholars have taken to accounting for political behavior in general, and specifically political activity.


**Optional**

**WEEK 4**

**Is Social Capital Eroding in America and, If So, What Can Be Done About It?**
Political analysts, as well as leaders, have become concerned about the declining quality of civic life in America. Political conflict and intolerance seem to be on the increase; political trust and political efficacy have declined. Ordinary Americans seem more divided from one another and less engaged in the political decisions that affect their lives. Scholars have studied what seems to be happening to these elements of “social capital” and have pondered what can be done about the changes they have seen.


**Optional**

WEEK 5

**How Ideological Are Americans? How Informed are Americans?**
Voting and public opinion often are analyzed in ideological terms -- e.g., left, right, liberal, conservative -- as if these terms reflect the thinking of ordinary citizens as readily as they do the thinking and rhetoric of political leaders. Converse’s classic 1964 work casts doubt on the ability of most Americans to engage in the level of constrained or consistent political thought that is required for them to be at all ideological. Subsequent recent studies, though, question Converse’s conceptualization and conclusions.


**Optional**

WEEK 6

*To what extent is America polarized?*
WEEK 7

How Central is Race in American Politics?
The question of race remains at the center of American politics, as it has throughout the history of the nation. Among its contemporary manifestations, affirmative action, welfare policy, and redistricting to enhance the prospects of electing African-American officials have received the most attention.


**Optional

Does Gender Make a Difference?
Women have become more involved in politics in recent years, challenging the traditional male dominance of the political world. As their involvement increases, in some areas attaining the levels of male involvement, attention has been drawn to how much it matters for such political behavior as voting in elections and service in legislatures and on the courts.


**Optional**


WEEK 8

**How Do Media Influence American Politics?**

Although the media are widely credited as powerful influences on Americans' political views, the absence of clear evidence of that influence for many years produced a "minimal effects" theory of the media. Recent research provides evidence of more substantial effects, but the nature of these effects varies considerably as does whether they represent influence of the media themselves or of the media simply as the conduit for messages from other sources.


**Optional**


Are Political Parties Dying or “Born Again”? 
Political parties, long presumed to be important and perhaps even essential actors for American democratic politics, have changed considerably in role and vitality in recent decades. After a long period of decline in their classic form, the political machine, local party organizations appear to have rebounded in strength. The differences between these “new” local parties and the traditional machines, though, raise the question of what party organizations are and how what they are affects the role they play.


* For the full report and subsequent commentaries see http://www.apsanet.org/~pop/APSAReport.htm#REPORT


**Optional

Why Do People Organize for Political Pressure? 
In his classic The Logic of Collective Action (1965), Mancur Olson observes that individual incentives to join with one another in pursuit of collective goods that can not be restricted are generally weak because of the "free rider" problem. Yet interest groups have proliferated in modern times, much as Madison feared they might in Federalist 10. This situation has led scholars back to the question of why people seem to join groups in spite of “rational” reasons not to do so.


**PACs and Interest Groups: Who Do They Influence and How?**

That organized interests will attempt to turn public policy to their advantage hardly surprising, as this is very much a part of democratic politics. Just how they do this, however, is more difficult to discern. Scholars have answered this question in different ways, narrowing the search for answers while leaving considerable mysteries yet to be solved.


**Optional**


**WEEK 11**

**What Motivates Members of Congress?**


**Optional**


**How Important Is Party in the House of Representatives?**
The majority party organizes the House of Representatives, dominating its committees, controlling the agenda on the floor, and generally regulating the flow of legislation. Yet some question whether this is really party control, because the power of individual members, the committees and their leaders, and even cross-party coalitions is substantial. In the end, the role party plays is an empirical question, subject to systematic investigation.


**Optional**

**WEEK 12**

**How uncompetitive are congressional elections?**


**Why are congressional elections so uncompetitive?**


WEEK 13

**What is the meaning of presidential power?**


**Optional**


WEEK 14

**Law or Politics: What Is the Basis for Supreme Court Decisions?**

The Framers of the Constitution created a Supreme Court with lifetime appointments, perhaps hoping that it would be sufficiently insulated from ordinary political pressures to make decisions based on legal canons and legal precedents, not political considerations. Some legal scholars conclude that these hopes, by and large, have been realized, whereas others see the Court is an eminently political institution, subject to the same political forces experienced by the other institutions, albeit in probably more muted form.


Does the Supreme Court Respond to Public Opinion?
At least since Robert Dahl’s classic “Decision-making in a Democracy: The Supreme Court as National Policy-maker” (1957), scholars have looked for a relationship between public opinion, especially as expressed through election results, and the decisions of the Supreme Court. Establishing this relationship is difficult, and therefore has been a source of enduring controversy. But the fact remains that the Court is not so aloof from popular pressures as its institutional insulation might presume.


**Optional

WEEK 15: TBA (STUDENT CHOICE)

WEEK 16: CONCLUSION, PAPERS DUE
SOME CLASSICS IN AMERICAN POLITICS


