American Politics

Introduction

This course is designed to introduce students to the study of American politics at the graduate level. The course is a survey and, by necessity, will be unable to cover any one topic in great detail, or even all of the major topics in American politics. I have attempted to include both foundational works that every student of American politics should know, as well as works that represent more current scholarship in various topics. Taken together, the required readings in the course, the supplemental readings focusing on debates within the field, and the other suggested readings should constitute a solid beginning for your preliminary exam preparation.

Required books are available at the campus bookstore. Most articles are available at JSTOR (http://www.jstor.org). Articles and readings that are more difficult to find will be placed on reserve in the 12th floor lounge. Students should be forewarned that the reading load is considerable. Unless otherwise indicated, students are expected to read assigned books in their entirety.

Seminar requirements

1. Class participation

Please come to class having completed and prepared to discuss all of the assigned readings. Regular class attendance is expected. Each student will be asked to serve as discussion leader for one or two sessions during the semester (depending on enrollment). Students will be asked to sign up to present the week’s readings to the class during the first seminar session, one leader per session. The discussion leader will be asked to summarize the most important theoretical arguments of that week’s readings and to initiate the class discussion for that week. The discussion leader is encouraged to use handouts or other instructional aides. Each student must choose session(s) to lead by January 27, on a ‘first-come first served’ basis.

Please notify me in advance for absences due to participation in religious observances and scheduled activities of official University student organizations. Class participation will constitute 20% of the final grade.
2. Critical Literature Review Essays

Students will be asked to write one critical literature review engaging in one of the debates/explorations listed on the syllabus. The essay should summarize the theoretical arguments presented, evaluate the arguments and their substantiation, identify theoretical or evidentiary flaws, and take a position on the arguments involved.

Each student should choose one set of readings by January 27. No more than 2 students per topic, given out on a ‘first come, first served’ basis. You may wish to consult the reviews in The American Political Science Review and Perspectives on Politics for some initial guidance. The review essays will be due at the beginning of the class following the session for which the readings are suggested. The topics and dates (of the relevant classes) are:

- February 10: Congress and the incumbency advantage
- March 3: Bureaucratic politics and the problem of control
- March 10: The Judiciary, the countermajoritarian difficulty, and judicial decision-making
- April 14: ‘How can 59 million Americans be so stupid?’—The problem of mass publics

The second critical literature review will bring together the assigned readings from two classes. Students should critically compare and contrast the theoretical arguments in the readings, in how they fit (or do not fit) together and the implications that a collective reading raises for the study of American politics. Each review will count towards 20% of your final grade.

3. Final examination

A two-hour closed book final examination will be given on Thursday, May 12. The exam is designed to help prepare you for the preliminary examination. You will be given a list of 6 questions in class on May 5. On the day of the exam, I will choose 3 of those questions and ask you choose and answer 1 of them. The exam will count towards 40% of the final grade.

Weekly Schedule

January 20: Course introduction

January 27: Political Power in American Democracy

Required readings


**Suggested readings (Power, Creed, and Exceptionalism):**

Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1840. *Democracy in America*.


**February 3: The Constitution**

**Required readings**

The Constitution of the United States

*The Federalist*, (especially numbers 10, 37-52, 70, 78-83).

Selected Antifederalist writings (Reserve).


Suggested Readings (What is the Constitution, and why do we pay attention to it?)

Beard, Charles. 1913. An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States.


February 10: Congressional Representation

Required Readings


Congress and the incumbency advantage


February 17: Congressional Policymaking

Required readings


Suggested readings


February 24: The Presidency

Required Readings


**Suggested readings**


**March 3: Bureaucratic Politics**

**Required readings**


**Bureaucratic Politics: Is control possible?**


March 10: The Judiciary

Required readings


The Judiciary: The countermajoritarian difficulty and judicial decision-making.

The Federalist, Number 78.


Spring break – No class March 17

March 24: Interest Groups

Required readings


**Suggested Readings**

*The Federalist*, Number 10.


**March 31: Parties, Campaigns, and Elections**

**Required readings**


**Suggested Readings**


**MPSA meeting – No class April 7**

**April 14: Public Opinion**

**Required Readings**


‘How can 59 million Americans be so stupid?’—The problem of mass publics


**April 21: Political Participation**

**Required readings**


**April 28: Voting Behavior**

**Required readings**


Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, Chapters 1-7, 19-20.


**Suggested readings**


May 6: Public Policy and Feedback Loops

Final exam questions handed out

Required readings


Suggested readings


Final Exam Thursday, May 12 (Time TBA)