Graduate Seminar in Comparative Politics:
Democratic Political Institutions

Objectives: Democracy is “the worst form of government, except for all the rest,” or so said Winston Churchill. In place of political communities that value such potential virtues as honor, courage, or faith, democratic states extol the virtues of liberty and equality. Yet as Locke, Montesquieu, Madison and others teach us, and as we continue to witness to this day, once a government is powerful enough to provide stability, security and the rule of law, it is also powerful enough to subvert the very democratic principles that its citizens may value. Scholars, citizens and rulers have struggled with this tension since antiquity, and this seminar explores these fundamental political questions. What is the best way to organize a democratic state’s political institutions? How can democracy balance the requirements of majority rule versus minority rights? How can democracy encourage organized political participation and contestation without devolving into disorganized political chaos? We will survey several topics and explore classic and contemporary theoretical and empirical research.

Format: Weekly readings introduce students to a debate, and only scratch the surface of the literature in that area. Some weeks could be the subject of an entire seminar; some topics are unfortunately ignored (e.g. federalism, political parties, bureaucracies, judiciaries…). For each theme the syllabus provides discussion questions to guide reading and note-taking. These questions are by no means exhaustive and do not provide a definitive agenda for seminar discussions; students are encouraged to incorporate their own interests into their literature reviews and into seminar discussion.

Assignments: All students taking the seminar for credit must do the assigned readings, write three papers, do three presentations, and participate in seminar discussions. Students will prepare two critical analyses of approximately 750-1000 words on part of one week’s readings. Each student will make one solo presentation and one collaborative presentation of their critical analyses; students will sign up for both presentations during the first seminar meeting. To accommodate discussion, literature review papers will be due 24 hours in advance of the seminar meeting time. Students will make a copy for each seminar participant and should also place one copy in the instructor’s mailbox. The papers/presentations should raise questions about the readings. If seminar enrollment requires students to prepare more than two critical analyses, only two of the papers will be graded (the student will decide which two).

The third paper will be a research design of approximately 2500 words (10-12 pages). A draft of this paper is due to me and to other seminar participants via email by noon on Monday December 11th. A research design is a project you would complete if you had the time and resources. Students will not be expected to actually complete the research for their project, but a research design is a good way to begin thinking about potential paper or dissertation projects. The instructor will distribute a “How to Prepare a Research Design” handout to guide your
preparation. Each student will be required to meet with the instructor individually to discuss his or her project and will be required to present the research design orally during the last class.

**Grades:** grading will be based on the following: critical analyses 25% each, research design 40%, and seminar participation 10%. Extensions, incompletes, etc., will be given out in accordance with department policy (that is, they will be actively discouraged!).

**Readings:** No books have been ordered through the bookstore. I strongly suggest purchasing the following books (on Amazon.com, where you might find a used copy, or directly from the presses, e.g.):


Many readings (the asterisked ones) are available on-line through the U libraries. Other readings will be placed on a seminar website.

**Topics and Readings**

**Week One: Introduction: Approaches to the Study of Institutions (Sept. 5)**

**Discussion Questions:**

1) What is rational choice theory, and what are its strengths and limitations?
2) Why does rational choice create such a polemic among political scientists?
3) What is a political institution? What is not?
4) What is the “new” institutionalism and what is “new” about it?
5) What are the differences and similarities between institutionalist approaches?
6) When does an institutionalist approach to politics fail short?
7) Can an institutional approach offer a solution to the agent-structure problem (or the micromotives versus macrostructures problem)?
8) When is endogeneity a problem for institutional research? What can be done about it?
9) What epistemological, ontological or other theoretical differences distinguish different “approaches” to the study of political institutions?

**Readings:**

- George Tsebelis, *Nested Games*, ch. 2.

Week Two: Institutions: Contracts or Coercion? (Sept. 12)

Discussion questions:

1) What is principal-agent theory? What are its assumptions? What insight into politics does one gain through its use, and what about politics does principal-agent theory gloss over?
2) Representative democracy requires delegation, but to what extent are the ideas of democracy and delegation in theoretical tension?
3) To understand the process of delegation, and to understand when delegation becomes abdication, we have to assume politicians’ motivations. How do we know what politicians want? How do we demonstrate that an existing principal-agent relationship is “optimal?”

• *Terry Moe, 1990. “Political Institutions: The Neglected Side of the Story.” JLEO 6:213-53 (Skip the sections on presidents and legislators, separation of powers, and parliamentary systems, but read the conclusion.)

Week Three: Comparing Visions of Democratic Institutions (Sept. 19)

Discussion Questions:

1) Is democracy a matter of institutional design?
2) How is institutional design associated with the “performance” of democracy?
3) Assess the weight of institutional and non-institutional factors in determining the “performance” of democracies.
4) Do all institutions have equal weight in determining political “outputs?”

5) What exactly is a veto player? How can you identify one?

6) How compatible are the Shugart/Carey/Carroll, Lijphart/Powell and Tsebelis visions of
democratic institutions?

7) What is Riker’s preoccupation about democracy? Lijphart’s and Powell’s? The others?
Are these scholars worried about the same thing or different things? Does it matter?

Readings:


Week Four: Electoral Systems and their Consequences (Sept. 26)

Discussion Questions:

1) Can the manipulation of electoral laws change the “quality” of democracy?

2) Do electoral institutions have a direct or interactive effect? How would we know? What is the “mechanism” through which electoral rules shape party systems?

3) What difference does the “number” of parties make for democratic performance?

4) Can the methods for selecting and electing representatives affect policy outcomes?

Readings:

- Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*, ch. 8
- Gary Cox, *Making Votes Count*, chs. 1, 3-4, 8, 10-11

Week Five: Choices of Electoral Systems (Oct. 3)

Questions for Discussion:
1) What factors are associated with a country’s choice of electoral system?
2) What factors are associated with changes in electoral systems?
3) How does the study of electoral system change help us understand broader processes of institutional change? (see week 11)

Readings:

- *Josep Colomer, “It’s Parties That Choose Electoral Systems (or, Duverger’s Laws Upside Down),” Political Studies 53:1 (March 2005), 1-21

Week Six: Executive-Legislative Relations I (Oct. 10)

Discussion Questions:

1) How can a government powerful enough to govern be effectively controlled?
2) What institutions distinguish parliamentary systems from presidential systems? What consequences do these differences have, and why?
3) What are the advantages and shortcomings of conceiving of political relationships within governments as “chains of delegation”?
4) How well (or not) does presidentialism fit into Lijphart’s, Powell’s or Tsebelis’ conception of democracy?

Readings:

- Selections from Lijphart, Parliamentary versus Presidential Government (1992): Montesquieu (Chapter 2), Madison (Chapter 3), Hamilton, (Chapter 4). Bagehot (Chapter 6), Wilson (Chapter 7), Laski (Chapter 8)
- Gary Cox, The Efficient Secret pp. 80-87
- Lijphart, Patterns of Democracy, ch. 7
- Shugart and Carey, Presidents and Assemblies, chs. 2-3, 5-8

Week Seven: Executive-Legislative Relations II (Oct. 17)

Discussion Questions:

1) Do the apparent virtues or vices of presidentialism not hinge on something intrinsic to presidentialism?
2) What other variables might affect the “presidentialism versus parliamentarism” debate?
3) Is the separation of powers a veto point? When and why?
4) Multiple veto players and/or veto points: good or bad for democracy? When and why?
5) To what extent are institutions important for the survival or collapse of democracy, relative to other factors?

Readings:

• David Samuels, “Separation of Powers.” For inclusion in the Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics, Susan Stokes and Carles Boix (eds.)
• Arend Lijphart, Patterns of Democracy, chs. 14-17

Week Eight: Legislative Politics (Oct. 24)

Discussion Questions:

1) What are the most important structures of legislatures? Why do they emerge and persist?
2) Are factors internal or external to the legislature more important for understanding the emergence, persistence, and change of legislative institutions?
3) Are factors internal or external to the legislature more important for understanding legislative output?
4) How useful are models developed for the US in understanding and explaining legislative politics elsewhere? How useful is Lijphart’s (or Powell’s) conception?
5) How does the party system relate to the internal structure of the legislature?
6) Would we expect to observe systematic differences in legislative structure between presidential and parliamentary systems? Why or why not?
7) Is parliamentary democracy a recipe for a weak legislature? Who “governs” under parliamentary systems: the prime minister, the cabinet, the bureaucracy, or the legislature?

Readings:


Week Nine: Political Parties: Rational-Choice Institutionalist Perspectives (Oct. 31)

- Gary Cox and Mathew McCubbins, 2005. Setting the Agenda, Ch. 2

Week Ten: Institutionalism and Identity Politics (Nov. 7)


Week Eleven: Institutional Change - Institutions as Dependent Variables (Nov. 14)

Discussion Questions:

1) What factors explain institutional evolution?
2) How can we assess which factors are more or less important in institutional evolution? Refer back to our week on choice of electoral systems.
3) How do arguments about institutional evolution avoid becoming functionalist?
4) In what ways do the readings for this week shed additional light on Week 5’s discussion?

Readings:


Week Twelve: Institutions and Political Representation (Nov. 21)

Discussion Questions:

1) Define “political representation.” In what ways does institutional design affect the form and extent or degree of representation?
2) In what ways can institutional design enhance or detract from political accountability?
3) How are citizens “represented” differently in parliamentary vs. presidential systems? What are the consequences of such differences?
4) In what ways ought we expect systematic differences in representation and accountability between regime types? Are other institutional or non-institutional variables more important?

Readings:

- Adam Przeworski, Bernard Manin, and Susan Stokes (eds.) Democracy, Accountability, and Representation, chs. 1 (Intro) & 3 (Stokes)
- Powell, chs. 3-4
- Shugart and Carey, ch. 9
- James A. Stimson, Tides of Consent, Chs. TBA.

Week Thirteen: Institutions and Political Accountability (Nov. 28)

1) How can a government powerful enough to govern be effectively controlled?
2) To what extent do you agree or disagree with Powell’s conclusions?
3) In what ways would you propose building on Powell’s research?

- Powell, *Elections as Instruments of Democracy*, chs. 6-10
- Christopher Anderson, “The Dynamics of Public Support for Coalition Governments” *CPS* 28:350-83

**Week Fourteen: Institutions and Economic Growth? (Dec. 5)**

**Discussion Questions:**

1) What causes economic development?
2) What measures economic development?
3) What measures property rights and their “security?”
4) Thinking beyond this seminar, in what ways does the “political economy of property rights” speak of other political economy approaches?

**Readings:**


**Week 15: Presentations of Research Designs (Dec 12)**