American Political Institutions (Political Science 520)

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Fall 2011  
Tuesday 3:00-5:00  
Lopata House 10  
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I. Purpose. The purpose of this course is to introduce graduate students to the study of American political institutions. To do so, we will read research on questions of importance in this area. We will cover such topics as the formation and influence of public opinion, the dynamics of Congressional voting behavior, the nature of bureaucratic politics, the determinants of Supreme Court decision making, the role and influence of political parties, and the reasons organized interests form and attempt to influence policy outcomes. This course is designed as a survey of the literature and is not meant to deal with all possible topics in American politics. It also does not exhaust the possible set of publications on any given topic. Indeed, I could create this syllabus a dozen times and come up with a different set of readings that would also introduce you to this body of research. I have chosen readings based on a number of (sometimes conflicting) criteria, such as: importance to the development of the literature (especially “classics” in the field), contemporary research that addresses centrally important theoretical and empirical questions, and pieces that succinctly convey central theories and approaches in the literature. Upon completion of the course, students will have a broad familiarity with the theories, approaches, and questions that animate this field.

II. Requirements and Grades

In addition to being introduced to the literature, this course has a second, and related, goal—to socialize students into the profession of political science through an understanding of the research process. We will obviously evaluate critically the arguments and evidence in each of the readings, but I also want you to think about why the author made the theoretical and methodological choices that he/she did. One thing that you will learn is that there are generally multiple ways of designing a study, and each alternative has different pluses and minuses. The researcher must determine (ex ante) which alternative “best” tests the hypotheses of interest. I want you to think through alternatives that the author might have considered and how the argument or evidence would have been affected by each of them.

To facilitate this process of evaluating the readings, I am requiring that students do the following.

1. I expect each student to read actively the material before class. By “active” reading, I mean that the student should think carefully about the research and critically evaluate it.

2. Each student will be responsible for “presenting” one to two of the assigned
articles (the number will depend on the size of the class) over the course of the semester. The student will style the presentation along the lines of a conference presentation and, in approximately 12 minutes, describe the research in the article and outline the central question, its relevance for the literature, the theory/hypotheses, research design and data, and results. Another student will be the “discussant” for the paper and thus be responsible for providing constructive criticism of it. The entire class will then offer comments and questions, and the “presenter” will be responsible for defending the research.

3. Each student will be responsible for helping to lead discussion during one class session. I expect the student to bring a list of questions to class which can help structure our discussion.

4. Each student will take a final exam that I will style in the manner of a comprehensive PhD question. I will provide one question, and each student will answer it in approximately 8-10 double-spaced, type-written pages. I will give the students 24 hours to finish the exam.

I will base grades on your participation in class (which is a function of 1, 2, and 3, above) and the final exam. Class participation constitutes 30% of your grade, and the final is worth 70%.

III. Readings

I will provide digital copies of all journal articles and chapters from edited books. In addition to these two sources, we will also read portions of various books. I strongly encourage you to purchase all of the books on the syllabus (except for the edited books), as it is a good way to begin building your library. You can purchase them online, and two of the best online booksellers are abebooks.com and powellsbooks.com. If you are unable to find the older books, we can make copies of the required chapters.

Assigned Books:


IV. Course Outline

Week 1. Introduction (August 30)

No readings

Week 2. Theories of and Approaches to Studying Politics (September 6)


A. Spatial Models


B. Rational Choice Institutionalism


C. Non-Rational Choice Institutionalism


D. Organizational Theory (and Principal Agent Models)


E. Political Psychology


Week 3: Ideology and Public Opinion (September 13)


Week 4. Political Participation and Voting (September 20)


Week 5. Political Parties, Issues, and Voting (September 27)


Week 6. Organized Interests (October 4)


Week 7. Congressional Decision Making (October 11)


**Week 8. Congress and Institutional Organization (October 18)**


Week 9. Supreme Court: Appointments, Agendas, Bargaining, and Norms (October 25)


Week 10. Supreme Court: Modeling Law and Legal Change (November 1)


Richards, Mark J., and Bert Kritzer. 2002. “Jursiprudential Regimes in Supreme Court


**Week 11. Presidency (November 8)**


**Week 12. Bureaucracy (November 15)**


Week 13. Separation of Powers (and Gridlock) (November 29)


Week 14. Concluding Thoughts and Discussion (December 6)

No readings