AMERICAN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS
(Political Science 520)
FALL 2013 SYLLABUS

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Class meeting: Tuesday, 3pm-5pm
Location: Lopata House 10
Office hours: Thursday, 10am-12pm

PURPOSE. The primary goal of this course is to introduce graduate students to the study of American politics. The course is designed as a survey of the literature; as such, it does not provide a comprehensive treatment of all possible topics in American politics. The readings are organized topically around a core set of substantive research questions and key scholarly debates. As the title of the course implies, we will review research on the major institutional actors in American politics, but we will also study the ways in which the public exerts influence on and is influenced by these institutions. Readings were chosen 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.

A second goal of this course is to critically evaluate existing research, particularly with respect to theoretical rigor, research design, and the links between theoretical claims and empirical tests. Part of our discussion each week should involve the consideration of alternative theories and different empirical/methodological approaches. Students are encouraged to use these opportunities to motivate their own research.

Finally, this course will also serve as an opportunity to introduce students to the discipline’s professional norms and expectations.

REQUIREMENTS. To facilitate the process of evaluating the field of American politics, students are expected to closely read the material before class and come prepared to discuss it. The success of this course depends on the active participation of all class members. Thus, attendance at all class meetings is a natural expectation of the course.

Each student will be responsible for leading at least one of the class discussions. (The exact number of presentations will depend on the course enrollment.) In 10-15 minutes, discussion leaders should offer a brief overview of the material for the week, with a particular focus on
distinguishing competing theories, insights, and empirical approaches while also synthesizing the material’s contributions to knowledge. These presentations should identify a set of questions that will motivate the discussion that follows.

Students will also submit short response papers to the assigned readings. Students are required to submit papers for six of the thirteen weeks of readings. These papers should be 3-4 pages in length (typed and double-spaced), but absolutely no longer. Hard copies are due in class each week. No e-mailed or late papers will be accepted. These papers should a) identify a specific research question related to the week’s readings and b) properly situate this research question by situating it within existing literature. These response papers should resemble the literature review section found in a journal publication.

Finally, each student will take a final exam that is modeled after a comprehensive exam. On the final day of class, I will distribute six questions, of which students will choose three to answer. Each answer should be approximately 5-8 double-spaced, typewritten pages, and students will have 48 hours to e-mail back their completed exam. *Please make arrangements now to clear your schedule so that you have sufficient time to complete the exam.*

The final exam will count 30 percent of your total grade, response papers will count 30 percent of your total grade, and the other two components (participation and discussion-leading) will each count 20 percent.

**READINGS.** The books listed below are assigned reading for the course. *I strongly encourage you to purchase all the books on the syllabus as it is a good way to begin building your library.* Copies of individual chapters from books not on this list will be available through electronic reserves. We will also read a number of journal articles, which you can access electronically through the university library’s website. Book chapters and some articles are available through e-reserves (http://ares.wustl.edu).

For most weeks, a supplementary list of optional readings is provided. These readings are not required for the course. Depending on your personal research interests, however, these readings may be extremely helpful for thinking about the topics that interest you. They also may be helpful to students writing response papers, as these additional readings may help construct a more comprehensive and thoughtful literature review. They also may be helpful for the purposes of extending the class discussion.
Assigned Books:


COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1. (August 27)  Introduction

No readings

Week 2. (September 3)  Theories of and Approaches to Studying Politics


A. Spatial Models

B. Rational Choice Institutionalism

C. Non-Rational Choice Institutionalism

D. Organizational Theory and Principal Agent Models

E. Political Psychology

**F. Network Analysis**


**Week 3. (September 10) ideology and Public Opinion**


**Optional:**


Week 4. (September 17)  

Elections and Vote Choice


Optional:


Week 5. (September 24)  

Participation


Optional:


**Week 6. (October 1)**

**Race and Class**


Optional:


Week 7. (October 8)  Interest Groups


Optional:


Week 8. (October 15)  Parties


Optional:


**Week 9. (October 22) Congress/Legislative Politics**


Optional:


Week 10. (October 29) Presidency/Executive Politics


Optional:


Week 11. (November 5) Courts/Judicial Politics**


Optional:


Week 12. (November 12)  Bureaucratic Politics


**Optional:**


Week 13. (November 19)  Interbranch Relations and the Separation of Powers


Week 14. (November 26)  Happy Thanksgiving; no class

Week 15. (December 3)  Federalism/State and Local Politics


