Course Description

This course covers a wide variety of topics in the study of state politics. Because our primary goal is to obtain a sense of the major theoretical and methodological issues in the sub-field, the readings are quite selective and should not be viewed as a comprehensive list of the most important literature in the field. While the list contains a wide assortment of studies that vary in terms of their approach and method, they are in large measure recent publications. The topics are divided into three broad sections. The first examines the various socioeconomic and political contexts in which state governments operate. Attention is given to variation in political party structures, interest group capabilities, and election practices. The second part focuses on the institutions in which policy is created and implemented. The organizations and processes associated with the legislative, executive, and judicial branches are examined in depth. Finally, the third section looks closely at various policy areas. We will spend time examining the problems or conditions identified as requiring government action, look at what governments have done to solve particular problems, and consider whether or not these efforts have had their intended effects.

Course Requirements

Class Participation

A large portion of the final course grade is determined by seminar participation. It is therefore imperative that students complete the assigned readings and take time to reflect upon them in a critical manner prior to class. Participation grades are determined by the quality of informed commentary contributed during our discussions.

Review Essay

In consultation with the instructor, each student will choose a topic and write a review of literature in a specific area of state politics scholarship. This review is similar to what is referred to as a “field essay” in which the author summarizes and evaluates literature that focuses on a particular set of questions. Students may choose their own topic, however, care should be used to choose topics that are not too broad or too narrow. It is important to pick a topic that has had enough published in the area so there are a good many studies to draw upon. But at the same time, one should not define an area of study so broadly that it is difficult to summarize the literature within a coherent essay. Some examples of areas to examine might be: legislator decision-making, leadership in legislatures, interest group or political party influence in legislatures, legislature-executive relations, judicial decision-making, state legislative elections, gubernatorial elections, political effects on policy adoption, public opinion effects on policy, etc.

I am expecting to see a 12-14 page paper (assumes 12 points font, double spacing, and one-inch margins) that characterizes the literature over the last half century or so. How has the study of this topic changed over time? The major dimensions to write about include:

- Types of questions addressed and the theoretical focus of the studies.
- Research designs employed (units of analysis, measures of key variables of interest, types of analyses conducted).
- Specific findings these studies have produced.
- How has our theoretical understanding of the topic changed? (probably the most important part)
- Where is this area of study headed – what questions come next?
- What are some constructive criticisms of this area of study?
A topic choice should be submitted by Monday, January 28. At an appropriate point during the semester, I will ask each student to make a brief presentation to the class about their topic (approximately 5-6 minutes). Ideally, these should coincide with the area we are studying for that particular week. The completed review essay is due a week from the Monday following the class presentation (11 days after the presentation).

Research Design

Students are expected to propose a research design on some aspect of state politics that could be undertaken with the limited financial resources that are typically available to most graduate students. I am expecting to see a 10-11 page paper (12 page maximum, not including bibliography; assumes double spacing, 12-point font, one-inch margins) that contains the following delineated elements:

a. Introduction of the topic, major question(s) addressed, and theoretical justification. Why is this question important to explore? (2 pages).

b. Review of the relevant literature (2 pages maximum).

c. Theory or model proposed and hypotheses to be tested (1-2 pages).

d. Outline of the key design features of the study: the conceptual and operational definitions of independent and dependent variables along with control variables (3 pages). Data to be examined.

e. Discussion of possible findings and how these findings will improve our theoretical understanding of the topic (2 pages).

You may choose any topic for your project, but there are two restrictions. The first is that it be a topic related to state politics. The second is that the question be addressed using some form of quantitative data analysis. A topic choice is to be submitted by Monday, February 18. We will discuss these research designs in class on Thursday, April 18. A final copy of the project is due on Monday, April 22.

Articles or Book Review

Students should choose two articles (or portions of a book) to review that are related to one of the week’s course topics. At the beginning of each class I will ask if students want sign up for a given week. I would like no more than two of these in a given week. Students should choose articles (or portions of a book) based on their relevance to the topic for that week in addressing a similar set of questions, but are distinct in some way (e.g., approach, data examined, level of analysis, time period, etc.). The readings must come from a political science journal or academic press and can be no more than about 10 years old. The review should not exceed 4 pages (total for the book portions or the two articles combined) that assumes double spacing, 12-point font, and one-inch margins. The review should summarize the major elements as well as provide some of your own commentary regarding criticisms or suggestions for extensions or improvements. One copy of the completed summaries should be provided to me (via e-mail or in my box in the department office) by 9:00 a.m. on class day. In addition, copies should be distributed to fellow students at the beginning of class. At an appropriate point in the seminar discussion, the student responsible for the extra articles will be asked to provide a brief (5-6 minute) presentation of these readings and how they relate to the material completed by the rest of the class. One final stipulation: the choice CANNOT overlap with the subject area of the Review Essay or the Research Design.

Final Examination

The final exam is a comprehensive exam that allows students to bring together the material covered in the course. It is a take-home, open-book exam and you may take as much time as you need to complete it. The only requirement is that you do not consult anyone once the exam has been distributed. The completed exam (hard copy) is due in my box on Friday May 10th by 4:00 p.m.
Evaluations

Grades for the course are based on a student’s performance in four areas:

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<th>Component</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review Essay</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Article or Book Summary</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Examination</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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Letter grades will be determined as follows: A = 90-100 percent, B = 80-89 percent, C = 70-79 percent, D = 60-69 percent, and F = below 60 percent.

Reading Materials

The books listed below are available for purchase in the bookstore.


All of the articles are available electronically though the LSU Libraries main page under the heading “ejournals”. There you type in the title of the journal (e.g., Journal of Politics, Legislative Studies Quarterly, etc.) and from that point options are provided for retrieving the electronic version of the article (e.g., JSTOR). I strongly encourage you to print the articles and bring them to class. Very often we will reference particular aspects of the articles (especially the tables) and it is important to have a copy of the article in front of you.

General Policies

Plagiarism is a serious offense. Use of another’s words, ideas, or data without giving proper credit will not be tolerated. Care should be made to properly cite sources where appropriate. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please consult me. I reserve the right to investigate when I suspect that you are not doing your own work. All violations of this policy are turned over to the Dean of Students for adjudication.

Due dates for all assignments are indicated on the syllabus. Penalties for handing in work late will be assessed based upon the circumstances, but will generally involve a loss of points. In others words, be certain that I receive your written work when it is due. If circumstances arise that prevent you from meeting a deadline, please let me know as soon as possible.

For students who have special needs or require accommodations through Disability Services, please advise me of your situation so arrangements can be made.
Course Schedule

January 17:  Introduction of Course

January 24:  Studying State Politics and Policymaking in a Federal System


January 31:  Political Culture, Ideology, and Public Opinion


February 7: Political Parties and Elections


February 14: Interest Groups


February 21:  **Direct Democracy**


February 28:  **Legislative Institutions**


March 7: Representation


March 14: Legislative Decision Making


March 21: Executive Branch


March 28: Judiciary


April 4: Spring Break

April 11: Policy Adoption and Change


April 18: Discussion of Research Designs

April 25: Policy Adoption and Change


May 2: Policy Consequences


