Political Science 7900
Seminar in American Politics
Spring 2012

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Course Description

This course is designed to introduce graduate students to some of the major theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of American politics. Because our goal is to obtain a sense of varied perspectives within different sub-fields, the readings are quite selective and should not be viewed as a comprehensive list of the most important literature in each area. However, the material covered will provide a foundation students can build upon through other courses in the field.

To the extent that the course has an overarching theme, it is to assess the U.S. brand of representative democracy. Much is made of how our government is one “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” A key question is whether the institutions and processes of politics and government live up to this ideal. Do citizens actually have much power? What conditions facilitate or impede the exercise of this power? How open and accessible is the political system for average citizens relative to elite groups in society? Ultimately, do the policies of government reflect the interests of its citizens? Another set of questions we will direct attention to involves the current state of American politics. Some contend that political institutions in the U.S. are “broken” or incapable of dealing with important problems facing the country. Is the U.S. political system dysfunctional? Are our political institutions in need up reform or updating?

Course Requirements

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

- Class Participation / Weekly Assignments 25%
- Article and Book Summaries (2 @ 7.5% each) 15%
- Research Design 25%
- Final Examination 35%

TOTAL 100%

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.

Weekly Assignments
Students will be expected to submit a one-page paper at 5 different times over the course of the semester. Students choose which weeks they wish to hand theses in. With regard to format, the paper should be divided into three sections that address the following questions:
(1) What are the major theoretical questions posed in the week’s readings and why are these questions important? (2) What are some of the major theoretical findings from the week’s readings? (3) Given these findings, what important questions remain to be addressed and how might scholars go about answering them? This last section is very important and I am expecting to see specific suggestions for future research and how such research might enhance our theoretical understanding of the topic. Please note: This one page assignment should not be longer than one page (assuming single spacing, 10-point font, and 1-inch margins). These assignments are due to me via e-mail (or in my box in the department office) by 9:00 a.m. on class day. Note that students writing summaries should not also write a weekly assignment for that week. These assignments will count toward your participation grade.

Article and Book Summaries
In consultation with the instructor, students will sign up in advance to complete summaries of a set of articles or a book at two different times during the semester (one of the two must be completed by March 6). These summaries should be on a set of four articles that consider a similar question or a book of the student’s choosing that is clearly related to the topic area covered for that week. For ideas or guidance, look at the previous syllabus I used for this course (“OLD SYLLABUS” on Moodle) and groups of readings labeled “Extra Reading Option”. You can add to these, update them, or find entirely new readings – it is up to you. The only limitation is that they be articles from leading journals or presses in political science. These summaries should be no more than 1½ single-spaced pages per article and no more than 4 pages for each book (assuming single spacing, 10-point font, and 1-inch margins). Each summary should contain sections indicating the question, theoretical context, data and methods, findings, authors’ conclusions, and your own comments. The section for your own comments is a very important part because here I want you to indicate how the research relates to other readings/themes of the week’s readings that everyone completed. A copy of the document should be provided via e-mail attachment to everyone in the class (including me) by 9:00 a.m. on class day. At an appropriate point in the seminar discussion, the student responsible for the articles or book will be asked to provide a brief (6-8 minute) presentation of these readings and how they relate to the material completed by the rest of the class.

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Research Design
A 20-25 page research design is required of all students. The paper should review and interpret relevant literature and propose a research project that could be undertaken with the limited financial resources that are typically available to most graduate students. The paper should contain the following elements: a literature review with an explanation of the contribution your project intends to make, a significant question or set of hypotheses related to a topic in American politics, and a practical research design that details the methods (data and analysis) to be used in assessing your research question. Students should begin work on this project soon after the semester is underway and consult frequently with the instructor about topics, relevant literature, and research methods. The final version of the paper (hard copy) is due on Wednesday May 2 by 4:00 p.m., however, other parts of the project are due at various points throughout the semester and count as 20% of the total research project grade. Further details concerning this project will be provided in a separate handout.

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 on Friday May 11th by 4:00 p.m.

Reading Materials

The books listed below are available for purchase from various bookstores on and around campus:


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.

Students in need of a brief re-introduction to statistical methods are encouraged to read relevant sections of *Political Science Research Methods* (4th edition by Johnson, Joslyn, and Reynolds, 2001, Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly). Chapters 11-13 of this book are particularly instructive and are available on Moodle. Finally, students who need a refresher course on the basics of American politics may want to consult an introductory American politics text as well as review fundamental documents such as The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution (with Amendments), and the Federalist Papers.

Note that the Moodle course page contains a copy of the syllabus and other supporting materials and handouts.

General Policies

Students are required to abide by the academic conduct policies outlined in the LSU Code of Student Conduct (*http://www.lsu.edu/judicialaffairs*). Examples of academic dishonesty include, but are not limited to: cheating on exams, plagiarizing, buying or selling assignments, and collaborating with others without permission. Plagiarism is, unfortunately, one of the most common forms of academic dishonesty and 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 a violation of any of these policies. Violations of the university’s code of academic conduct are turned over to the Dean of Students for adjudication.

Due dates for assignments are indicated on the syllabus and research project handout. 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 to the Course

January 24    Constitutional Context / Political Attitudes and Opinions


January 31    Turnout and Participation


February 7    Political Parties and Nominations

February 14  Presidential Campaigns and Elections: Voters and Outcomes


February 21  Mardi Gras

February 28  Other Campaigns and Elections


March 6  Interest Groups


March 13:  Mass Media


March 20  Legislatures


March 27  Executives


**April 3**  
**Representation**


**April 10**  
**Spring Break**

**April 17**  
**Judiciary**


**April 24**  
**Research Design Presentations**

**May 1**  
**State and Local Institutions and Politics**


