Political Science 7915
Seminar in State Politics and Policy Making
Spring 2015

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Wednesday 9:00 – 11:50
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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 socio-economic 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 you complete the assigned readings and take time to reflect on them in a critical manner prior to class. Participation grades are determined by the quality of informed commentary contributed during our discussions. Each week a list of discussion questions will be provided in advance of our class meetings (check Moodle a few days prior to seminar) that will form the basis of our initial discussions. In addition to these questions you should also be prepared to answer a set of standing question for each article or book: (1) What is the major research question addressed by the study? (2) Why is this question important or interesting? In other words, what political behavior, activity, etc. does it help us better understand? (3) How is this study’s approach different (or similar) to past approaches? (4) What is the nature of the research design used to address the topic and what empirical data are examined? (5) What are the major findings? (6) How do these findings enhance our theoretical knowledge of the topic and are there any practical implications? and finally, (7) What improvements could be made on the study and what questions come next? In other words, where does the research go from here?

Frequent participation in the seminar is expected and 75% of your overall participation grade is determined by this activity, so be prepared to take part in class discussions. The remaining 25% of your participation grade is based on brief written reports and presentations that you make to the class about recent research on and developments in state politics. One of these reports will be on a research article involving state politics from an academic journal published within the past three years. The written report should be approximately 1-2 typed pages (double spaced) and handed in at the end of the class when it is presented. Two additional reports are expected during the semester on some aspect of state politics covered in a recently published newsmagazine/newspaper/blog piece. Ideally, it should be on a trend or development in more than one state. Excellent sources for such articles include: Pew Charitable Trusts’ stateline.org, Governing magazine’s governing.com, and The National Conference of State Legislatures blog at ncsl.org. A half-page report (double-spaced) should be handed in at the end of the class on the day it is presented (note the report should include a full citation of the article examined). At an appropriate time during class, students will volunteer to make a brief presentation on their article (4-5 minutes) and indicate how it relates to the day’s topic.
Review Essay

In consultation with the instructor, each student will choose a topic and write a review of literature on 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 focused on a particular set of questions (see the Annual Review of Political Science for examples of such essays). 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 choose a question that is so broad 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 20-30 years or so with an emphasis on how the studies have 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 to me via e-mail by Monday, February 2. At an appropriate point during the semester, I will ask each student to make a brief presentation to the class about their topic (approximately 6-7 minutes). Ideally, this should coincide with the area we are studying for that particular week. A printed copy of the completed review essay is due to me on the Monday following the class when it is presented (5 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 9-10 page paper (12 page maximum, not including bibliography; assumes double spacing, 12-point font, one-inch margins) that contains the following delineated elements (Part A, Part B, etc.):

A. Introduction of the topic, major question(s) addressed, and theoretical justification. Why is this question important to explore? (1-2 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, 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 to me via e-mail by Monday, March 9. We will discuss your research designs in class on Wednesday, April 15. A final printed copy of the project is due on Monday, April 20.

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 (on the last day of class). The completed exam (printed copy) is due in my box on Friday May 8 by Noon.


Evaluations

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

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review Essay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Design and Presentation</td>
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<td>Final Examination</td>
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<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 following book is available in the LSU bookstore:


The following book is available electronically for free through the library:


The following books are recommended for those who need a quick review of basic research design issues and statistical concepts:


Nearly 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). A few of the more recent ones may only be available through the journal’s web-site’s “on-line first” section. However, the easiest way to obtain an article is to simply use Google Scholar from a computer connected through the university system (it nearly always takes you directly to the article for download). 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

Students are required to abide by the academic conduct policies outlined in the LSU Code of Student Conduct ([http://www.lsu.edu/judicialaffairs](http://www.lsu.edu/judicialaffairs)). Examples of academic dishonesty include, but are not limited to: cheating on exams, plagiarizing, buying or selling assignments, altering grades, intentional deception, and collaborating with others without permission. I consider plagiarism to be a very 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. All violations of the university's academic conduct policies are turned over to the Dean of Students.

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 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 14: Introduction of Course

January 21: Studying State Politics and Policymaking in a Federal System


January 28: Political Culture, Ideology, and Public Opinion


February 4: Political Parties and Elections


February 11: Interest Groups


February 18  Mardi Gras Holiday

February 25:  Direct Democracy


March 4:  Legislative Institutions and Representation


March 11: Legislative Decision Making


March 18: Term Limits and Legislatures

March 25: Executive Branch


April 1: Judiciary


April 8: Spring Break

April 15: Policy Adoption and Change I


***** Research Design Presentations *****

April 22: Policy Adoption and Change II


April 29: Policy Consequences


