Field Seminar in American Politics  
Politics G53.1300.001  
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Why a Course in American Politics?

American politics is a strange field in political science – it is the only field at NYU and many other American academic institutions on the same level as those fields, which are not country specific, such as International Relations and Comparative Politics. Why does American politics get this special role?

At one level the answer is simple – there is a large demand for courses in American politics at the undergraduate level across the United States, larger typically than the demand for courses in other fields. Why? Many undergraduates want to go to law school or public policy school or study journalism or other social science and want to take courses in American Politics in preparation for those endeavors. Many state schools require that all undergraduates have exposure to courses in American studies or politics or history. These courses need teachers and to get a job teaching these classes, scholars need to study American Politics. Having a field in American Politics increases the job options for scholars looking for jobs in the U.S. without a doubt.

But there is also a more complicated answer. American Politics is a field where researchers have applied some of the most sophisticated formal modeling and econometric techniques in their research. In fact, these two branches of the science part of political science were first applied in the study of American politics and dominate the study of American politics more than in the fields of International Relations and Comparative Politics. As a result, the research that has been conducted in American Politics has served in numerous ways as impetus and exemplars for research in other fields. American Politics, as a field, has helped develop many of the micro level models and research strategies used to research other countries and many of the approaches to studying International Relations. Although the advantage of methodological sophistication in American Politics over other fields is decreasing (and some might argue no longer significant), the study of American Politics does involve the examination of some of the most “science” oriented work on the domestic politics of a particular country, which can be extremely useful for those interested in studying other countries or political situations.

What Will You Learn About American Politics In This Course?

As the core course in American Politics, the goal of this course is to give students an overview of current academic research in the area. It serves as the springboard for students who want to make American Politics one of their fields and as a summary of the field for those who do not. But we only have one semester and the literature on American Politics can be overwhelming. Sometimes instructors of core classes in
American Politics try to cover this literature by both having students read classics (works written before the advent of more sophisticated analyses) as well as more recent, sophisticated work. However, there is a cost to that approach, the more recent and usually more sophisticated work (which is the most useful for scholars who want to work in the area or use it as exemplars for research in other areas) gets less attention as the more simpler classical approaches are discussed. Students can finish the class and not have a good idea of what currently is of interest to scholars in the field. Most of these classics are classics for good reason, but they are also work that can generally be read independently and those who want to make American Politics their research focus will probably find them enjoyable. I assume if you are interested in an area that you will want to go back and read the earlier literature in that area. Finally, I believe that having classes of students reading the same classic treatments can have a harmful effect on our ability to break new ground in political science. That is, I believe that the classics have been so overused by other scholars looking for insights that you are probably more likely to find a gem of new knowledge in a previous reading that has been neglected by most or in doing some original empirical research than spending time debating and reading the classics. Thus, our focus in class will be on recent, modern, scientific work on American Politics, not the classics.

Many of the readings will be organized around a text I recently completed for advanced undergraduate students, *Analyzing Elections*, for W.W. Norton, which summarizes a significant portion of the current literature on American politics with a particular emphasis on the electoral process. These chapters may be especially useful for students who are unfamiliar with the American system or some of the formal literature that has been applied to that system. These chapters and occasional other readings will be listed on the syllabus as background readings and considered optional. The book is supposed to be published before the spring semester begins and you can order it online. Whatever royalty I get from having you read the book will be made up with some treats during the semester.

There are a few other books that we will read during the semester as well as articles. I recommend that you purchase these books through Amazon.com. The articles, if published, are easily found through electronic sources. If an article is not available electronically, and I have a copy, I will attempt to provide it to the class. It is a good idea for you to go through the course schedule as soon as possible and order books that we will be reading.

Finally, this class is restricted to students who are in the PhD program and have completed both the first year math class and the first semester quantitative methods class. Completion or simultaneous enrollment in Game Theory is also desirable as many of the papers we will consider apply game theoretic models to American Politics.

### Class Procedures

Each week there are required readings. I have limited the required readings to two articles (in some cases books) per class. We will devote approximately one hour to each
reading. I find that if there are too many required readings we are not able to get into any one of them in depth enough to learn anything as a class. As noted above, I have selected for required readings only articles or books published in the last few years. I have restricted my selection so that after taking this class you should have a good idea of what is of current interest in the areas covered. I have also listed recommended readings that serve as background for the required readings, which you should consult if you have trouble understanding the arguments in the required readings or just are interested in further study on the particular topic. The older articles listed are often considered by some “classics” in the field, although some are just articles that I think should be considered classics.

One important caveat – oftentimes the required reading is not significantly of different quality or importance than some other articles or books listed in the recommended readings and sometimes a recommended reading is actually more important in my view. The required readings were sometimes chosen over other alternatives in order to present a variety of methods and approaches as well as perspectives on the area and to find things that we could fruitfully discuss in class. Just because I selected something as required and something else as recommended does not mean that I value the required more than the recommended. If you decide to work further in any of these areas, you should read both the required and recommended readings.

I have also listed the relevant optional review readings for the week, which can also serve to help illuminate the required readings. Note that in some cases the background readings are the same for different weeks, for example one background reading for the week on candidates, parties, and policy choices may also be a background reading for the week on Congressional elections if the reading’s focus is on these choices in Congressional races.

For each required reading you should be able to do the following after reading:

- Describe the main themes of the reading
- Explain what its contributions are to our understanding of politics
- Provide specific criticisms of the study (e.g., its theoretical argument, empirical analysis, etc.)
- Raise questions about specific theoretical or empirical issues that you did not understand

The success of our class discussions will depend on your being able to do all of these things for each of the assigned readings. This means that when we meet as a class, you should be prepared to discuss the themes, contributions, criticisms, and questions.

Each week two of you will act as a “defender” for the readings, one for each reading. In this role, you will: 1) spend no more than 10 minutes summarizing the reading, 2) discuss the main contributions made by the reading, and 3) discuss the potential shortcoming raised by fellow students in critiques and defend against them. The defender will be in charge of leading the discussion of the readings for the week. In some cases, it
may be necessary for the defender to go through some of the mathematics of the formal model (if relevant to the discussion) or the assumptions and techniques used in the empirical analysis (if relevant to the discussion). In some cases the assigned reading refers to a formal model in an optional background reading or an empirical analysis or discussion there. The defender will be expected to have read that optional reading and be able to explain the formal model or empirical analysis in the optional reading. The defender should therefore know the reading backwards and forwards as well as relevant optional background readings in order to do discuss these aspects of the reading.

Students not assigned as a defender for the week will be expected to read critically each of the week’s readings.

Summary:

Each reading will have a Defender.
Defenders should be prepared to go through all the details of a particular paper and the relevant background reading that the paper refers to (formal models and empirical analysis included).
If not a Defender for the week, each student will read the two assigned readings.
Each reading is discussed for approximately one hour in a discussion led by its Defender.

Course Grades

Final course grades are calculated as follows:

- Participation in Class: 30%
- Defender Role: 30%
- Final Research Paper: 40%

The specifics on the research paper will be discussed in class.
Weekly Schedule

You should note that some of the required readings below are books and you should order them immediately so that you are sure to have them prior to the week that they are required.

January 26th – Political Participation: Dissolving Myths and Solving Puzzles

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Optional Review Readings:

Analyzing Elections, Chapters 2 & 3


**February 2nd – Who Influences Candidates’ Policy Choices: Valence Voters and Polarizing Parties?**

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Snyder, James M. and Michael M. Ting. 2002. “An Informational Rationale for Political


Optional Review Readings:

Analyzing Elections, Chapters 4 & 5


**February 9th – Money in Politics: Who Gains and Who Loses?**

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Optional Review Readings:

Analyzing Elections, Chapters 6 & 7


February 16th – Elections and Principal-Agent Problems: Pandering versus Accountability

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Optional Review Readings:

Analyzing Elections, Chapters 9 & 10


**February 23rd – Public Information and Opinion: The Problems of Media Biases and Preference Conflicts**

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Baron, David. 2004. “Persistent Media Bias,” working paper, Stanford U. Graduate School of Business


Optional Review Reading:

Analyzing Elections, Chapters 8 & 10

March 2nd – Legislative Elections and Redistricting: How Gerrymandering and Voting to Get Reelected

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Optional Review Reading: Analyzing Elections, Chapter 11

**March 9th – Legislative Politics and Bicameralism: Parties, Bodies, and Geography**

Required Readings:

Cox, Gary W. and Matthew McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the US House of Representatives*, forthcoming, available online at Matthew McCubbins’ web site at UCSD.


Optional Background Readings:


Knight, Brian. “Parochial interests and the centralized provision of local public goods: evidence from congressional voting on transportation projects,” JOURNAL OF PUBLIC ECONOMICS 88 (3-4): 845-866 MAR 2004


Rohde, David. 1991. Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House


Optional Review Reading:

Charles Stewart, Analyzing Congress, W.W. Norton

March 23rd – Presidential Elections: Inequalities Across the States

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Battaglini, Marco, “Sequential Voting with Abstention,” forthcoming, Games and Economic Behavior


http://bpp.wharton.upenn.edu/jwolfers/Papers/Voterrationality.pdf

Optional Review Reading:

Analyzing Elections, Chapters 12 & 13

**March 30th – Sharing Power and Executive/Legislative Relations: Bargaining Versus Blaming**

Required Readings:


Optional Background Reading:


Greenstein, Fred. 2001. *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Clinton*


Optional Review Reading:

Analyzing Elections, Chapter 13

April 6th – The Politics of Delegation to Bureaucrats and State and Local Governments: Red Tape Versus Katrina

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Optional Review Reading:


April 13th – Judicial Politics

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Segal, Jeffrey A. and Harold J. Spaeth. 2002. *The Supreme Court and the Attitudinal Model Revisited*


**April 20th – Midwest Political Science Association Meetings**

**April 27th – American Politics Over Time, Minor Parties, & “Realignment”**

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Optional Review Reading:

Analyzing Elections, Chapter 14

**Note Classes Officially End on May 1st – but if we have time we might discuss the following on May 4th since we will miss class due to MPSA**

**May 4th (or some other day) – Minorities in American Politics**

Required Readings:


Optional Background Readings:


Gerber, ER, Morton, RB, Rietz, TA, “Minority representation in multimember districts,” AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW, MAR 1998, VL 92, IS 1, 127-144


Optional Review Reading:

Analyzing Elections, Chapter 15