

POSC 109: Introduction to American Politics-- Political Science vs. "Conventional Wisdom"  
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Professor Justin Buchler

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Office Hours: Wednesday 1-3 and whenever my door is open

If you read the newspapers, watch television, or talk about politics, you know the conventional wisdom. Sometimes conventional wisdom is correct, and sometimes it isn't. The aim of this course is to get beyond conventional wisdom and dispel myths. In the first section of the course, we will discuss the theoretical foundations of American politics. The second section will focus on elections, with perspectives on voters, parties, the media, and other factors in election outcomes. In the third section, we will discuss the three branches of government at the national level. In each section, we will discuss what conventional wisdom says about American politics, and we will contrast that with political science research. In doing so, we will discuss not just where conventional wisdom seems right and where it seems wrong, but how to evaluate conventional wisdom using social science. The key question for the course is, "how do you know?" After all, "science" is a method, not a subject.

The formal requirements of the course are as follows: papers (40%), a midterm (10%), a final exam (30%) and active participation in class (20%).

The papers for this class will come in sequence as part of a unified project. The first paper must be handed in to my box in the Mather House mail room by 4 P.M. on Friday 1/19. Yes, that's right, your first paper is due at the end of the first week of class. This is a non-negotiable course requirement. If you do not hand in this paper, you will be dropped from the class. Your assignment is to answer the following question: How does the American political system work? In your answer, you must address why you think some candidates win and others lose, why some policies are made and implemented and why others are not, and generally speaking, why things happen the way they do. You must address both electoral issues and policy-making issues. Your answer should NOT be a high school civics discussion of what the Constitution says or basic processes such as how a bill becomes a law. Instead, your answer should be interpretive and analytical. There is no specified length for this assignment, so make it as long or as short as it needs to be. However, write carefully, and hold onto a copy of this paper because...

The paper project for the class is to critique what you wrote in your first paper. This critique will be completed in several stages. The first stage will be to choose a single claim (interpretive, causal or normative, but not factual-- see assignment handout) from your first paper and critique it. This part of the assignment will be due on 2/27, and will account for 1/8th of your paper grade. The second stage will be to critique the election-related claims of your paper, and that will be due on 4/3, and account for 1/4th of your paper grade. The remaining 5/8ths will be based on a complete critique of your first paper, due at the end of the last week of class. Improvement will be rewarded-- the purpose of the first two critiques is to force you to not procrastinate and to get feedback on your progress. Essentially, your job will be to show me what you have learned by the end of the semester. Consult course handouts for additional guidance on this project, and we will discuss it throughout the semester.

I strongly encourage you to talk to me throughout the semester to discuss this project. Don't attempt to put each stage off until the deadline and write a half-... er... -baked summary of your lecture notes. This paper will be easier to complete if you work on it consistently throughout the semester when the material is fresh in your mind.

## Class structure

Since this class meets only twice per week, we will incorporate both lecture and discussion into most sessions. Always come to class having done the readings for the week, and prepared to discuss materials. Stop me at any point in class to ask clarification questions.

## Classroom rules:

- 1: Check your ideology at the door. The classroom is not the place to preach. It is a place to keep an open mind.
- 2: Be respectful. Show up on time, pay attention, participate, and turn off your cell phones. It is better not to attend than to violate any of these rules.

## LATE ATTENDANCE POLICY

My pet peeve is when students walk into the classroom after class has started. I find it distracting and disrespectful. I would rather you not attend class than walk in after class has started. The first time you walk in after class has begun, there will be no penalty. Each additional time you walk into class after class has begun, one percentage point will be deducted from the class participation component of your course grade (obviously, up to a maximum of 20). The objective is not to punish you for being late. The objective is to get you to show up on time. If you have a class on the other side of campus just before our class, you need to speak with me about it at the beginning of the semester.

## FALLING ASLEEP IN CLASS POLICY

My other pet peeve... Since daily attendance is not required, if you cannot stay awake, don't come to class. There is NOTHING worse than falling asleep in class, and I have no tolerance at all for it. If I catch you sleeping, your course participation grade will be reduced by five points (again, out of twenty). You don't get any free passes on this. Drinking heavily caffeinated beverages during class is perfectly acceptable. If you don't think you can stay awake, it is also acceptable to say you aren't feeling well, and ask to be excused.

Texts include the following books

Jacobson, Gary C. and Samuel Kernell. The Logic of American Politics, 3rd edition.

Love, Nancy (ed.). Dogmas and Dreams, 3rd edition.

Patterson, Thomas. Out of Order

Several of the readings are not in these texts. I have placed them on the course Blackboard site (posc109buchler), and noted on the syllabus which readings are there.

The readings for each week are listed below.

## **I: Foundations of American Politics**

1/16-1/18      Power in American Politics: The Theory of Pluralism

Readings:      Dahl, selections from Who Governs? (ON-LINE)  
pages 1-8, 89-103, 163-165, 169-189, 123-128, 271-275

1/23-1/25      The Constitution and Basic Principles  
Readings:      Kernell and Jacobson, Chapters 1, 2, 3, Appendix 3, 4, 5

1/30-2/1        Ideology in Modern American Politics  
Readings:      Kernell and Jacobson, Chapters 4, 5  
                    Love, Parts, I and II

## **II: Elections**

2/6-2/8         Public opinion  
Readings:      Jacobson & Kernell, Chapter 10

2/13-2/15      Voting  
Readings:      Jacobson & Kernell, Chapter 11  
                    Teixeira, The Disappearing American Voter, Chapter 3 (ON-LINE)  
                    McDonald and Popkin, *The Myth of the Vanishing American Voter* (ON-LINE)

2/20-2/22      Political Parties  
Readings:      Jacobson & Kernell, Chapter 12

2/27-3/1        The Media  
Readings:      Patterson, Out of Order

3/6-3/8         Determinants of elections  
Readings:      Jacobson, The Politics of Congressional Elections, chapters 2, 3 (ON-LINE)  
                    Bartels and Zaller, “Presidential Vote Models: A Recount” (ON-LINE)

3/13-3/15      SPRING BREAK

3/20             Review for MIDTERM  
3/22             MIDTERM

## **III: Institutions**

3/27-4/5 Congress  
Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapters 6, 13  
Fenno (ON-LINE)

4/10-4/19 The Executive  
Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapters 7, 8  
Kaufman, Red Tape (ON-LINE)

4/24 Courts  
Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapter 9

4/26 Wrap up