

POSC 109: Introduction to American Politics  
Spring, 2014

Professor Justin Buchler

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Office Hours: T/TH 3:30-4:30 and whenever else my door is open

Political Science is not simply discussion of politics. It is the application of the scientific method to questions about politics. This course serves as an introduction to American politics by applying a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning to popular dialog about American politics. That dialog is driven by the journalistic convention of explaining events and processes in terms of narratives. Buried within those narratives, though, are a combination of implicit and explicit assumptions about why things happen the way they do. Why do some candidates win and other candidates lose elections? Why does policy-making alternate between productivity and gridlock? The explanations posed and assumed by journalistic narratives sometimes comport with Political Science, and frequently diverge from what scholars have found.

This class will serve as an introduction to the scholarly study of American politics and a guide to understanding political news by demonstrating how social science reasoning can be applied to explain the patterns we observe. “Science” is a method, not a subject, and that method can be applied to any falsifiable proposition. This class will treat common claims in current political dialog as propositions to be tested with social scientific reasoning. The central question for the course is: how do you know?

The structure of the class, then, will be determined partially by current events. The syllabus includes a schedule of general topics to be covered and associated readings. However, by Monday of each week, you will receive an email through the course Blackboard system with a link to a recent news story, editorial, column or similar piece that either makes a direct claim about why current events are playing out the way they are, or uses questionable implicit assumptions. The Tuesday session for that week will be devoted to explaining what the author got right or wrong by applying social scientific reasoning to the claims. My goal will be to use a story that ties directly to the general topic for the week unless something so dramatic happens that it warrants immediate discussion. If you come across a piece that you would like to discuss, I STRONGLY encourage you to send it to me as a suggestion/request.

Thursday sessions will be devoted to seminar-style discussion of the topic. Each student will attend Thursday sessions with a TYPED statement or question about the materials for the week that deserve further debate. These questions will be used to guide discussion.

The formal requirements of the course are as follows: two short papers (15% each), a midterm (25%), a final (30%), and active participation in class (15%). Note that attending class and sitting silently throughout the semester is not active participation.

## **Attendance**

Attendance is required. You may miss three sessions. Each absence beyond that will result in a three percentage point deduction from your course grade. Exceptions will only be granted under extraordinary circumstances. To clarify, you do not have three excused absences plus doctors' notes. You have three excused absences in total, so it would be best to save them for when you are ill. Please contact me as soon as possible if you have an extended bout of serious illness. This is a seminar, so attendance and participation are critical.

You are also expected to show up on time. I find it distracting and disrespectful when students walk in after class has begun. You may show up late once during the semester. Each time you show up late beyond that, one percentage point will be deducted from your course grade. 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.

## **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/blackberries/iphones/otherwise-unmentioned-little-gizmos. If you fall asleep in class, five percentage points will be deducted from your course grade. You don't get any free passes on this. Drinking heavily caffeinated beverages during class is perfectly acceptable. (I can't teach an early class without coffee). 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. Doing so will not count against your permitted absences.

## **Texts include the following books**

Samuel Kernell, Gary Jacobson, Thad Kousser and Lynn Vavreck. The Logic of American Politics, 6th edition.

John Sides and Lynn Vavreck, The Gamble

Several of the readings are not in these texts. I have placed them on the course Blackboard site, and noted on the syllabus which readings are there. Additional articles may be included on an *ad hoc* basis depending on the news articles to be used for any given week.

The readings for each week are listed below.

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

1/14 Introduction: Social Science vs. Storytime

1/16 The structure of social science

1/21-1/23 The nature of power

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

1/28-1/30 The Constitution and Basic Principles

Readings: Kernell et al., Chapters 1, 2, 3, Appendix 3, 4, 5

## **II: Elections**

THROUGHOUT THIS SECTION, PLEASE READ SIDES & VAVRECK, Chapters 1,2, 5-7

2/4-2/6 Public opinion

Readings: Kernell et al., Chapter 10

2/11-2/13 Voting

Readings: Kernell et al., Chapter 11

Teixeira, The Disappearing American Voter, Chapter 3 (ON-LINE)

McDonald and Popkin, *The Myth of the Vanishing American Voter* (ON-LINE)

2/18-2/20 Political Parties

Readings: Kernell et al., Chapter 12

2/25-2/27 The Media

Readings: Kernell et al., Chapter 14

3/4 Determinants of elections

Readings: Jacobson, The Politics of Congressional Elections, chapters 2, 3 (ON-LINE)

Achen and Bartels, "Blind Retrospection" (ON-LINE)

3/6 MIDTERM

3/11-3/13 NO CLASS- SPRING BREAK

### **III: Institutions**

3/18-3/27 Congress

Readings: Kernell et al., Chapters 6, 13

Fenno (ON-LINE)

4/1-4/10 The Executive

NOTE: NO CLASS ON 4/3-- PROFESSOR AT CONFERENCE

Readings: Kernell et al., Chapters 7, 8

Kaufman, Red Tape (ON-LINE)

4/15-4/17 Courts

Readings: Kernell et al., Chapter 9

4/22-4/24 Wrap-up and review