

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

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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday 3:30-4.20 and whenever else 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. The purpose of this class is to show how political scientists use data and deductive reasoning to test claims about politics.

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, and throughout the class, we will follow a consistent method to test claims about American politics.

The formal requirements of the course are as follows: paper project (80%), active participation in class (20%).

The paper project for this course will be completed in stages. The first paper must be handed in to my box in the Mather House mail room by 4 P.M. on Friday 1/18. 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, and for reasons that will soon become clear, there will be no extensions granted for this requirement. However, what is due on 1/18 will not be graded. Your task is as follows. The schedule on this syllabus indicates a series of questions that we will address each week. For Friday 1/18, you must attempt to answer each of these questions based on what you think you know about politics. Do not try to combine each of the answers into a conventional paper-- treat it as a series of questions to answer separately. 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 answer from your first paper and critique it based on course materials. This part of the assignment will be due on 2/29, and will account for 1/8th of your paper grade (10% of your course grade). The second stage will be to critique two more answers from your first paper -- it will be due on the election-related claims of your paper, and that will be due on 4/4, and account for 1/4th of your paper grade (20% of your course 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. You may, of course, hand in additional drafts of other claims at any time for feedback. 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. 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.

## **Attendance**

Attendance is required. You may miss three sessions for any reason. Each absence beyond that will result in a three percentage point deduction from your course grade. Exceptions will only be granted under extraordinary circumstances-- if you skip three classes for frivolous reasons, a doctor's note will not excuse you from a fourth absence, so don't skip class unless you have a very compelling reason. 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**. 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. 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**

1/15-1/17      Power in American Politics: The Theory of Pluralism

*Questions:*

*Who has power in America?*

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

1/22-1/24 The Constitution and Basic Principles

*Questions:*

*What is the rationale for having a government in the first place?*

*What are individuals' responsibilities to the government, and what are the government's responsibilities to individuals? To what degree does the Constitution provide guidance to answer those questions?*

Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapters 1, 2, 3, Appendix 3, 4, 5

1/29-1/31 Ideology in Modern American Politics

*Questions:*

*What are the underlying values of liberalism and conservatism, and how do they lead to different policy conclusions?*

Readings: Kernell and Jacobson, Chapters 4, 5  
Love, Parts, I and II

## **II: Elections**

2/5-2/7 Public opinion

*Questions:*

*How polarized is America?*

*How sophisticated is public opinion in America?*

Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapter 10

2/12-2/14 Voting

*Questions:*

*Why is voter turnout so low in the U.S., and how does it fluctuate over time?*

*Why do some people vote, and others not?*

*What are the consequences of low voter turnout?*

*When people do choose to vote, what determines how they vote?*

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)

2/19-2/21 Political Parties

*Questions:*

*Why do we have parties, and why only two viable parties?*

*How has the strength of the Democratic and Republican parties changed over time?*

Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapter 12

2/26-2/28 The Media

*Questions:*

*Is there a pervasive bias in media coverage of politics?*

*How do the media affect public opinion?*

Readings: Patterson, Out of Order

3/4-3/6 Determinants of elections

*Questions:*

*Who wins congressional elections, and why?*

*Who wins presidential elections, and why?*

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

Bartels and Zaller, "Presidential Vote Models: A Recount" (ON-LINE)

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

3/11-3/13 SPRING BREAK

### **III: Institutions**

3/18-3/27 Congress

*What motivates Members of Congress, and hence, how can they be influenced?*

*Who has power within Congress, and why?*

*Has Congress become more polarized, and why?*

Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapters 6, 13

Fenno (ON-LINE)

4/1-4/10 The Executive

*Questions:*

*How much power does the President have, and why?*

*What are the causes and consequences of divided party control of the federal government? (one party controls Congress, the other holds the presidency)*

Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapters 7, 8

Kaufman, Red Tape (ON-LINE)

**NOTE: NO CLASS ON 4/3!!!**

4/15-4/17 Courts

*Questions:*

*How does the Supreme Court interpret the Constitution, and to what degree do they allow their personal beliefs to affect their decisions?*

Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapter 9

4/22-4/24 Conclusions and wrap-up