

POSC 109: Introduction to American Politics

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Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday 1-2 and other times by appointment

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 “conventional wisdom” about politics. 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. This course will present a systematic evaluation of major pieces of conventional wisdom about American politics, and show how misleading conventional wisdom can be.

After some introductory materials, there will be two broad sections for the course. The first section will focus on elections, with perspectives on voters, parties, the media, and other factors in election outcomes. In the second 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 (60%), final exam at the regularly-scheduled period (20%), and active participation in class (20%). Please note that “active participation” does not mean full attendance while sitting silently. I expect active engagement in the classroom.

The final exam will be readings-based. It is intended to be simple for those who keep up with the readings, and impossible for those who don’t. Keep up and you shouldn’t have to worry about it. The more challenging assignment is the paper project. The paper project will be completed in stages. The first paper must be handed in to my box in the Mather House mail room by 9 A.M. on Wednesday 9/7. Yes, that’s right, your first paper is due at the beginning of the second week of class (Monday is Labor Day). This is a non-negotiable course requirement. If you do not hand in this paper, you cannot complete to course, and for reasons that will soon become clear, there will be no extensions granted for this requirement. I have done it this way for more than ten years, I will continue to follow this rule, and it works. However, what is due on 9/7 will not be graded, so don’t stress yet. Your task is as follows. The schedule on this syllabus indicates a series of questions that we will address each week after the introductory materials. For Wednesday 9/7, 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 make sure not to delete the file because... (**SIDE NOTE: back up your files obsessively. Feel free to ask me about the many times that has saved my hide**).

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 10/10, and will account for 1/6th of your paper grade (10% of your course grade). The second stage will be to critique a different from your first paper -- it will be due on 11/14, and account for another 1/6th of your paper grade. The remaining 2/3s will be based on a complete critique of your first paper, due in class on the final day of class (12/9). 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

This course meets three times per week. Monday and Wednesday sessions will be primarily lecture, although I will attempt to incorporate some discussion, and Friday sessions will be entirely discussion. I am/was a pathetic loser who engaged in certain activities involving dice with unusual numbers of sides. I will begin class with questions about themes from the week, and what we have read and discussed. I will roll dice, and that will determine who begins the discussion. Whenever discussion wanes, the dice will determine who speaks next. Come prepared. If you are unprepared on the topic because, for example, you haven't done the readings, that will be reflected in your course participation grade.

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 damned phones. Laptops, though, are different. Any student using a laptop is volunteering to be my classroom research assistant. If it is out, that better mean you can quickly look up whatever is relevant to discussions upon my immediate command. 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 and Thad Kousser. 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.

The readings for each week are listed below.

In addition, feel free to follow my blog, which you are *not* required to read. I just try to keep it entertaining, but focused on political science analysis of the news.

theunmutual.blogspot.com

If you get the reference, congratulations. You are a nerd of truly obscure tastes.

I: Foundations of American Politics

8/29-9/2 Course Introduction, and the process of social science

9/5 NO CLASS- LABOR DAY

9/7-9/9 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

9/12-9/16 The Constitution and Basic Principles

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

II: Elections

Please read Sides & Vavreck throughout this section of the course— we will reference it periodically.

9/19-9/23 Public opinion

Questions:

How polarized is the American public?

Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapter 10

9/26-9/30 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)

10/3-10/7 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

10/10-10/14 The Media

Questions:

Is there a pervasive bias in media coverage of politics?

How do the media affect public opinion?

Readings: Jacobson & Kernell, Chapter 14

10/17-10/21 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)

10/24 NO CLASS— FALL BREAK

10/26-10/28 2016: The year political science stopped working?

Questions:

Uhhh... I gots lots myself...

Readings: Maybe somebody will write something cogent... (TBA)

III: Institutions

10/31-11/11 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)

11/14-11/23 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)

11/25 NO CLASS — THANKSGIVING

11/28-12/2 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

12/5-12/9 Wrap-up and review