This course covers some of the scholarly literature on American politics and is designed to introduce you to some of the current theories and debates among scholars of American government and politics. This seminar should meet the needs of graduate students in Political Science who plan to conduct original research, master a doctoral field, or teach in one or more areas of American politics.

The bulk of this course will focus on a sample of important books and articles, primarily on current topics in American politics. Each week we will focus on a major question or debate in American politics. While I have tried to devote at least one week to common topics in American politics, this course is not a comprehensive treatment of the field. Research on American politics is too numerous to master in one course. However, the readings in this course will cover a wide range of intellectual problems, theoretical perspectives, research designs, and analytical methods used in research on American politics. I hope that this course will also help you gain a feel for how political scientists think about, formulate, and execute research.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

Throughout the semester, seminar participants will engage in four main activities. First, each week we will as a group discuss a set of assigned readings on a scheduled topic. I expect you to read and analyze these pieces with care. The readings, especially the articles, are often dense, and require time and patience to digest. You must keep on schedule with the required readings to participate in seminar discussions each week. The additional “recommended” readings listed for each week are not required for this course, although they are useful for students who want to learn more about a particular topic (especially in preparation for comprehensive exams). Although the amount of reading material may seem overwhelming, by professional standards I have only included a fraction of the relevant readings on each topic.

Second, each week, beginning with the September 9 seminar meeting, participants will prepare a written question designed to generate discussion in the seminar. Discussion questions may focus on a single book or article, or on a set of the assigned readings for a particular week. Discussion questions will be due by 4:00 pm each Wednesday. You can send me your questions by email or drop them in my box in the political science
department office. The best questions will provoke lively discussion and thoughtful comments from participants in the seminar. The questions may address the main research question that week, critique the approach used in one or more of the studies, compare the implications of some of the readings, or raise unresolved issues from the readings. In some cases, your question may be more of an argument than a question. You may find these questions easier to prepare if you keep track of questions you ask yourself as you are reading the assigned material. I will grade your discussion questions for September 9, but this grade will not count toward your final course grade. Questions submitted for the remaining weeks of the semester will contribute toward your final grade.

Third, for three of the seminar meetings, you will prepare a short (5 page) critical review of three of the assigned readings for that week, and you will be expected to assume a larger role in seminar discussions that week. These essays should help you crystallize your thoughts on the readings and will serve (along with your questions) as a basis for your contribution to each seminar’s discussion. Essays are due at the beginning of class, and all three short paper grades will count toward your final course grade. In general, the essays should address the following questions about each of the readings you review in a succinct, composition format.

1. What is the main research question?
2. What are the main substantive findings and arguments?
3. [Briefly] What method and evidence are used to answer the research question?
4. Are the arguments and evidence presented by the author convincing? Do the theory and concepts help us understand other cases?
5. What connections do you see between the readings?
6. Does the research improve our understanding of American politics?

Fourth, for the final course paper, you will review a “classic” article or book in American politics, trace the work it spawned, and attempt to identify the reasons for its status as a classic. My hope is that you will learn something about what makes some works more interesting and important than others. I have attached a list of suggested classics at the end of the syllabus. You should make a selection from this list. If you would like to substitute some other piece of classic research, please discuss it with me first. In either case, you must inform me of the classic you select by October 14. The final paper (about 15-20 pages long) should address the following questions:

1. What are the main arguments, concepts, findings, or evidence in the classic? What made it a unique study?
2. Since publication of this classic, what have political scientists added to what we know about the topic?
3. Has subsequent research vindicated the main arguments made by author of the classic? Cite at least ten studies in making this evaluation.
4. What direction(s) has research taken in the wake of the classic?
5. What makes the book or article you selected a classic?
6. Do classics (and this one in particular) facilitate or retard the growth of knowledge?
The final paper is due in class on the last day our seminar meets (December 9). On that
day, each student will present a summary of his or her paper. Your presentation should
inform the rest of us about the research your classic has generated and why it is a classic.
You will have 10 to 15 minutes to make your presentation to the class.

I will base your grade on the extent and quality of your participation in class (30%), the
quality of your short essays and discussion questions (30%), and the final paper (30%)
and class presentation (10%). Obviously, I expect you to attend every seminar session.

COURSE READING MATERIALS

The assigned readings for this course cover many current questions being investigated by
scholars of American politics. As observers of human behavior, social scientists often
work like detectives (e.g., investigating the causes of events, gathering evidence,
advancing tentative explanations, eliminating dead ends). We will make this connection
more explicitly during the semester as we examine some current puzzles facing political
scientists studying American politics.

REQUIRED BOOKS


Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

University Press.

Aside from the required books for the course, articles and excerpts from books on the
assigned reading list will be posted on the MyGateway web site for the course.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

Course readings and assignments do not provide you with a full sense of the political
science profession. You also need to know the newest work when it appears (not when a
professor assigns it), and news within the profession. One way to learn about what is
happening in political science is to become a member of the American Political Science
Association. An annual APSA membership provides a subscription to two quarterly
academic journals (American Political Science Review and Perspectives on Politics), and
a quarterly journal and newsletter about the profession (PS: Political Science and
Politics) at a bargain price of $40 for one year. To learn more about APSA, go to the
COURSE SCHEDULE AND TOPICS

Week 1: August 26
Introduction
Course Schedule and Organization

Week 2: September 2
Methodological and Theoretical Approaches to American Politics

Assigned Reading:


Recommended Reading:


**POLITICAL BEHAVIOR**

**Week 3: September 9**  
**Public Opinion**  
How do people come to form and express political opinions?

*Assigned Reading:*  


Recommended Reading:


Week 4: September 16
Political Activity, Social Capital and Voting Behavior
What motivates political activity?
Are social capital and political participation declining in the United States, and if so, why?

Assigned Reading:


Recommended Reading:


**Week 5: September 23**

**Race and Politics**

How does race influence American politics?

Why have southern whites turned dramatically toward the Republican Party?

*Assigned Reading:*


*Recommended Reading:*


**Week 6: September 30**

**Gender and Politics**

Do the values and behaviors of men and women in politics differ, and to what effect?

*Assigned Reading:*


**Recommended Reading:**


Susan Carroll and Richard Fox, eds. 2006. *Gender and Elections*.


**INTERMEDIARIES**

**Week 7: October 7**

**Media and Politics**

How have recent changes in the mass media, influenced American politics?

*Assigned Reading:*


Recommended Reading:


**Week 8: October 14**

**Political Parties**

How powerful are political parties?

Is partisan polarization on the rise, and if so, why?

*Assigned Reading:*


*Recommended Reading:*


**Week 9: October 21**

*Interest Groups*

How much influence do interest groups have?

Do business and moneyed interests dominate American politics?

**Assigned Reading:**


**Recommended Reading:**


INSTITUTIONS

Week 10: October 28

Congress
How much do political parties influence Congress? What explains decision-making and action in Congress?

Assigned Reading:


Recommended Reading:


**Week 11: November 4**

**The President**

What factors produce strong leadership in American politics?

How do presidents lead?

**Assigned Reading:**


**Recommended Reading:**


Week 12: November 11
The Supreme Court
Is it law or politics that influences Supreme Court decisions?

Assigned Reading:


Recommended Reading:


**Week 13: November 18**

Bureaucracy

Can the President and Congress control the executive branch bureaucracy?

*Assigned Reading:*


*Recommended Reading:*


**No classes the week of November 25 (Thanksgiving Break)**

**MACRO POLITICS**

**Week 14: December 2**

*Agenda-Setting and Policy Formulation*

What moves public policy? Why do agendas and policies change over time?

*Assigned Reading:*


*Recommended Reading:*


Richard Pacelle, The Transformation of the Supreme Court's Agenda: From the New Deal to the Reagan Administration (1991)


Week 15: December 9
Class Presentations

Classics in American Politics (suggestions for the final paper)


