PLS 820: Proseminar in American Politics
Fall 2014
M/W: 10:20-11:40AM
Room: S. Kedzie Hall 104

Instructor: Prof. Corwin D. Smidt
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Office Hours: Tuesday 10AM-Noon, or by appointment

Course Description
This course seeks to introduce students to the vast research literature in political science and its claims of
the nature of democratic governance within the United States of America. The objectives of this course are
twofold:

1. that you are introduced to prominent debates within many of the major subfields of American politics,
   with an emphasis on debates specific to American politics.

2. that you develop the basic skills to become a critical consumer of American political science research
   such that you can quickly synthesize and evaluate research on your own for future independent work.

This course will not present you with a reading list of “must reads” for your studies prior to comprehensive
examinations. It is assumed you can do that on your own (see below). Instead, the goal is to emphasize
the perspectives and skills that will make your own studies more beneficial. We seek to critically evaluate
research to identify what they and cannot tell us about American politics.

Seminar Format
Seminars will cover different subfields in American politics roughly each week. The selection of readings
for each week is neither meant to be exhaustive nor representative of all topics of interest within each sub-
field. Instead, the intent is to review work that speaks to a core or prominent debate specific to that subfield.

At the beginning of each week I will provide a very brief review of the main features of each subfield. The rest of the seminar is devoted to critically evaluating each article and the contributions it makes. One student will be assigned to lead the class in describing and evaluating each article. During this discussion, other students (and professors) are expected to interject and provide additional thoughts, questions, or contrary evaluations at times.

There are other things that we will rarely do during class, but are still expected of you to do in conjunction with this course:

- Before class, reviewing (Googling) features of American law and government that are discussed in
  articles, but unfamiliar to you (e.g., What are amicus curiae briefs? What does the rules committee
do in Congress?).

- Checking out and reading sources the selected articles reference to familiarize yourself with other
  aspects of the debate.

- Checking out relevant critical literature reviews in the Annual Review of Political Science or the Oxford
  handbook series to broaden your exposure to each subfield more broadly.
• Developing your own research ideas on how to extend, improve, or integrate other research work with the perspectives and arguments covered in seminar. Discuss with classmates.

• (Optional) Discussing with your comrades why your professor lacks verstehen and/or upholds the antiquated dominant paradigm.

Requirements and Grading

Your duties for this class will be comprised of the following components:

• Article Summaries ($\approx 40\%$): For each article you are required to write an article summary that answers the following questions:

  1. What is the article’s contribution? What does it do? Answer in a single sentence
  2. Identify the article’s dependent variable, key independent variable(s), and each null and alternative hypothesis.
  3. Briefly summarize the motivation and reasoning behind the article’s research question and hypothesis (the theory) and data selection (if relevant).
  4. Briefly summarize the results (do they support the hypotheses?) as well as your evaluation of the article (any comments/criticisms).

Each article summary should be no longer than one side of a single sheet of paper, with double-spaced 12-point font and one-inch margins. All summaries for a week’s assigned articles need to be printed out on paper and handed in to me at the beginning of class on Monday. Article summaries are evaluated for how accurate, concise, and informative they are.

• Leading and Participating in Class Discussion ($\approx 30\%$): Class participation is a major element of your grade. This grade will not be function of how often you talk or the percentage of time you say something “wrong” or “right” in class. In contrast, this grade will reflect your ability to provide reason and insight to the course material and contribute to class discussion. Personal ownership over an original perspective is a plus, to the extent it adds to discussion. I prefer that you be boldly wrong for the right reasons (i.e., solid argument) than meekly right for the wrong reasons (i.e., guessing).

• Final Paper ($\approx 30\%$): More on this later. Either a research proposal or a critical literature review.

Grading in this class follows typical graduate school conventions. A 4.0 represents very good work, a 3.5 represents adequate completion of the course, a 3.0 indicates less than adequate performance, and a 2.5 or lower indicates very poor performance.

Note: For your benefit, I do not favor giving out incompletes. I also do not accept late assignments.

Schedule

I hope to have all readings available for you on the course’s angel site. If not, most of the journal articles are found on JSTOR or alternative library databases. For those readings not available, electronic copies are available on the class website. **Summaries are not required for readings marked with an asterisk.**
Date  | Subject                                                                 |
---    |-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
Aug 27 | Introduction                                                             |
Sep 1  | No Class (Labor Day)                                                    |
Sep 3  | Political Science and American Democracy: What’s the point?              |


Sep 8, 10 Political Participation and American Civic Culture: is America becoming less civic?

Sep 15, 17  Public Opinion: How stable are the political preferences of the mass public?


Sep 22, 24  Ethnicity and Identity Politics: What contexts make race more or less divisive?

Sep 29, Oct 1  Partisanship: Blind loyalty, or something more?


Oct 6, 8  Voting and Elections: How much and in what what way do campaigns matter?


Oct 13, 15  Representation: How (well) does it work?


Oct 20, 22  Organized Interests: Do they peddle influence?


Oct 27, 29  Legislative Politics: Do parties matter?


Nov 3, 5  Judicial Politics: Are Supreme Court justices constrained by law?


Nov 10, 12  The Presidency: Do presidents lead or do they follow?


Nov 17, 19  The Bureaucracy: Who controls the bureaucracy?


State & Local Politics and Policy: Does federalism improve or worsen government provision of social welfare?


Dec 1, 3 Students’ Choice! TBD

**A Couple Last Things**

**Academic Misconduct**

Academic misconduct will not be tolerated. Specifically, claiming ownership of ideas and or work that is not your own is considered cheating or plagiarism. It is an insult to me, your peers, and yourself; it is not to be tolerated. Instances of cheating will be handled according the school’s policy on integrity of scholarship and grades.

**Electronic Submissions**

As a general rule, students should always submit their work in paper form. If, under special circumstances, you are submitting a document electronically, then you need to submit it in an archival format. This means no modifiable Word/Text documents (.doc, .txt, .rtf) and instead formats where content is fixed (.pdf, .ps).