PSC 505: SEMINAR IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Jake Neiheisel
University at Buffalo, SUNY
Office: 422 Park Hall
Class Day/Time: W 9:00-11:50 AM
E: jacobnei@buffalo.edu
P: 716.645.8439
Office Hours: MWF 12:30-2:00PM or by appointment
Classes held in 502 Park Hall

Course Overview
This course is an introductory, graduate-level overview of the vast literature in political science on American politics. Throughout the semester we will focus on what I see as some of the more interesting questions that have occupied the attentions of scholars in the field for generations. Some “pro-seminars” of this nature march through the classic works in American politics, moving systematically through a greatest hits collection of books and articles on topics ranging from democratic theory and American political institutions to political behavior and organizations. Such classes are, in essence, introductory courses on American politics that have taken a few vitamins and packed on the muscle. Other seminars of this nature cover a few topics or current debates in the field in great depth, often to the exclusion of many others of arguably equal import. There is absolutely nothing wrong with either approach. For this course, however, I have chosen to present a sort of “middle path.” Each week of readings addresses a different question, highlighting how the evolution of theory tracks with development of research design and testing.

By necessity, this approach couples classic readings with more current work—some of which is still forthcoming. In an effort to bring breadth of coverage together with some depth, both are at times given short shrift. For this reason each week features a list of recommended works (usually books) in addition to the required readings. You will want to have taken a look at these (and many, many others) prior to taking your comprehensive exam in American politics. I urge you to take a look at these works on your own time. You should also be reading current work in the top general journals and in select subfield journals. Unlike in the field of international relations, where a running joke suggests that there are a dozen “top-three” journals, the three most recognizable general journals in the discipline (the American Political Science Review, the American Journal of Political Science, and the Journal of Politics) are widely (but not universally) acknowledged as the best outlets for work on American politics to appear. If you have an affinity for political behavior, you should also be taking a look at the journal of the same name. Interested in Congress? Well, Legislative Studies Quarterly is for you. I also urge you to take a look at other “pro-seminar” syllabi that are out there.

Finally, you will note that there are writings from some “local celebrities” on your list of required readings. This is not an accident, as I have designed much of this syllabus in a way that showcases some the strengths of the American politics faculty here at Buffalo.

Course Requirements

- Class Participation 20%
- Discussion Leadership 10%
- Literature Reviews 15% Total
- Article Reviews (3) 15% Total
- Research Design 25%
- “Comp” 15%
EXPLANATION OF REQUIREMENTS

Class Participation
This class demands your active participation. In order to participate, you need to be in class. It therefore should go without saying that attendance will also be taken into account when calculating your overall participation grade. You will be evaluated on the quality of your in-class comments as well as, to a much lesser extent, the quantity of your public remarks. Whether you plan to join the ranks of the acade me as a professor or use your training in another arena (common non-academic outlets include business, market research, non-profits, government, and political consulting), you will need to be able to communicate ideas effectively and demonstrate a facility with difficult, often abstract discussion material. As such, your contributions to in-class discussions will be reflected in your course grade. You are expected to come to class having read the required readings and ready to talk.

Discussion Leadership
You will be responsible for leading discussion on one occasion. Which class you take on I leave entirely up to you. These assignments will be handed out on a first-come, first-serve basis. You may want to type up a little discussion guide for this class. At a minimum, though, you will want to come to class with a copious amount of notes and discussion questions, and be ready to jump in with something new whenever the conversation stalls.

Literature Reviews
The ability to write a good literature review is a very important skill to have in your toolkit. Throughout your graduate career you will need to be able to synthesize a large amount of information in a concise, informative manner. To this end, I want you to write a number of literature reviews over the course of the semester. These are to be roughly one (single-spaced) page in length. In these reviews you are to take a week’s worth of readings and pull out the main lessons. Where possible, make the readings speak to each other and highlight where you might improve upon the works that you read in that particular week. These are not to be simply summaries of the readings. Rather, you are to turn a critical eye to the readings and point out gaps in our understanding of the week’s topic (insofar as the scholarly literature is represented by the assigned pieces). In an effort to encourage you to focus on the ideas, rather than the authors themselves (rarely is it appropriate to construct a literature review in a “so-and-so said X, while so-and-so said Y”), I only want to see the authors’ names in the parenthetical citation. You do not have to write one the first two weeks of class. After that, if you aren’t a discussion leader or writing an article review, you should be writing one of these. These are due at 9PM the day before class meets.

Article Reviews
At some point you will be asked to review a manuscript for a journal. This is a critical service, as the peer-review process does not work without individuals in the discipline who are willing to donate their time to read and evaluate papers that have been submitted to a journal for publication. While some individuals in the discipline no doubt use this opportunity to “gate keep,” the vast majority take their role as referees very seriously. Increasingly, journal editors are turning to graduate students to provide reviews, as they are often closest to the methods that, for better or worse, are central to evaluating the worth of a manuscript. On three separate occasions you will write a review of a particular article. While you might assume that, as a published work, the pieces that we read in this
class are beyond reproach, sometimes this is just not the case. There is certainly a stochastic component to the review process. As a result, some pieces are published that are flawed in any number of ways. And while no paper is without shortcomings (this is just the nature of the beast—you can’t do everything), some pieces that we will read in this class are clearly more polished than are others. For this assignment, you will take three different articles and critique them as if you had been asked to evaluate them for potential publication in a scholarly journal. These are to be about a page to a page and a half in length (single-spaced). Be critical, but also constructive. The third week of class you will read an article that I have recently had accepted for publication. It went through three rounds of review, so you will get to take a look at a wide variety of reviews. I can also make available to you some of the reviews that I have written recently. These are due by 9PM the day before the class period during which we will be discussing your article.

Research Design
Ideally, this ten to twelve page paper will build upon one of the lit reviews that you wrote throughout the semester. Take your critique of a particular literature and turn it into a plan that will improve upon the shortcomings that you noted or expand the literature in a different direction. Identify a clear research question and be up front about the particular tack that you desire to take in answering it. Assume that you will have all the money in the world to execute your research design. Think carefully about how you can gain leverage over your question of interest. This is due the last week of classes.

“Comp”
As this pro-seminar is designed to help you prepare for a comprehensive exam in American politics, your final will consist of an oral examination. Closer to the end of the semester I will draw up a list of potential questions. While you do not have to answer them in writing, as you will have to do during a “real” comprehensive exam, you should prepare as if you would be completing a written component as well. That is to say that you should take notes and make outlines without actually writing out an answer to each question. You may have these notes with you during the oral exam, but try not to use them as a crutch. Your “comp” will be held during exam week.

CLASS SCHEDULE

August 27th – Introduction and Introductions
• Overview of the syllabus
• Opening remarks

September 3rd – Political Science as a Discipline and Profession


Recommended:


DISCUSSION LEADER: Mumo Nzau

September 10th - Do Presidential Campaigns Matter?


Recommended:


**DISCUSSION LEADER: Devon Beck**

September 17th - Does Public Opinion Mean Anything?


**Recommended:**


**DISCUSSION LEADER: Kevin Gallagher**

**September 24th - How Stable is Party Identification?**


**Recommended:**


**October 1st - What Explains Changes in Aggregate Voter Turnout?**


**Recommended:**


**DISCUSSION LEADER: Nicholas Hillman**

October 8th - Economic Voting: Do Members of the Electorate Vote with Their Pocketbooks?


  Recommended:


DISCUSSION LEADER: Soma Hawramee

October 15th - What are the Determinants of Congressional Elections?

  Recommended:


DISCUSSION LEADER: Si Chen (Catherine)

October 22nd - Political Communication: Does Elite Rhetoric Shape Attitudes and Change Minds?


Recommended:


October 29th – Interest Groups: Where Do Groups Focus Their Resources?


Lowery, David, and Virginia Gray. 244. “A Neopluralist Perspective on Research on Organized Interests.” *Political Research Quarterly* 57(1): 164-175.


**Recommended:**


November 5th - Do Parties Matter in the Legislative Arena?


**Recommended:**


November 12th - Can the President Shape Public Opinion?


Recommended:


November 19th - Are the Courts Political Institutions? Do they follow Precedent?


Recommended:


Discussion Leader: Carla Calabro

November 26th - Fall Recess (No Class)

December 3rd - Choose One:

Race and Politics/Gender and Politics: Does Descriptive Representation Lead to Better Policy Outcomes for Minorities?
The Bureaucracy: Who Controls the Bureaucracy?
Political Parties: Are the Parties “Responsible,” “Functional,” or Both?
Political Psychology: How Do Voters Decide?
State Politics: Is there a “Race to the Bottom” when States Compete?

Discussion Leader: Eric Rosiek