American Political Frontiers: Macropolitics

PSC 761, Fall 2007
University at Buffalo, SUNY
Seminar Room Park Hall
6:00 – 8:50pm Tuesdays

A great deal of political science research in American politics focuses on the individual political actor: the citizen, the voter, the representative, the activist, the candidate, the elected representative. Aggregate or macro politics has often been examined only as a way to make ecological inferences about individual behaviors when individual data is unavailable. In recent years, however, there has been growing interest in aggregate politics for its own sake. There has been a rebirth of interest in examining and explaining American macropolitics.

This course will review several general studies of American macropolitics and then explore research on specific macropolitical topics. Among the possible macro-political subjects to be addressed in this course are: inter-election congressional seat change, the polarization of public opinion, reasons for fluctuations in turnout rates, declarations of presidential mandates, the passage of major legislation, presidential support levels in Congress, the dynamics of presidential and congressional job approval ratings, the growth in the size of the national government, the impact of partisan control on national economic growth, partisan realignments, and election forecasting.

This is not your standard graduate seminar. This is a research intensive course. Students are expected to be conversant in quantitative analytical techniques. Each student will conduct a research project for this class. The course is focused on teaching the conduct of professional political science research and each student in the class is expected to produce a publishable piece of research by the end of the semester.

Course Requirements

Course grades will be based on three considerations: class participation, your paper proposal, and your research paper. These will combined in the following percentages to compute your overall course grade:

1. Class Participation 30%
2. Paper Proposal 10%
3. Research Paper 60%

Class participation in a graduate seminar of this sort is not optional. After the first week of class, the professor should not talk any more than any member of the class. You should not just sit back and wait to be asked a question. It is expected that you have views about research that you state and can defend.

Every student will prepare, present, and defend a paper proposal by the fifth week of the class. The paper proposal should indicate (1.) the specific research question you will be trying to answer, (2.) what is known about it and the reasons why it is an important question, (3.) the
possible answers that you anticipate to the question (your hypotheses), and (4.) how you intend to try to answer the question (measurements, data, and methods). You should formulate several macropolitical research questions in the first week or two of the class and investigate the research that has been done on these questions. Remember, you will be conducting research to answer a research question, not picking a topic. The question should be answerable and the question should be a real one. That is, the answer should be really open to question, not necessarily obvious. Your paper proposal is to be distributed and presented to the class. Each member of the class is responsible for reading and offering critical commentary (hopefully constructive) on each other’s paper proposals.

The most important part of this course is conducting the research. A segment of each seminar meeting from week 6 through week 15 will be devoted to updating the class on the progress of your research and addressing any questions that you might have about your project. You will present the a preliminary and then completed versions of your paper in the last few weeks of the class. These presentations should be in the format that would be used at a professional conference. You will have 10 to 12 minutes for each presentation. These will be followed by questions from the class. The presentation, questioning, and response to questioning will all be taken into account in your grade. Don’t sit back and just observe.

**CLASS READING**

There are five books that I have ordered for this class. Others may be added, but the rest of the reading will largely be of journal articles. The five required books are:


The assigned reading have been tentatively spread out over weeks 6 through 15, though these can be altered depending on the selection of research questions for your macropolitics papers. You are also strongly encouraged to seek out additional research on these topics and discuss them with the class in the meeting relevant to the research topic or question.


**Course Schedule of Topics**

**Week 1, August 28**

Introduction to Macropolitics.

Five Examples

1. The American Campaign
2. Partisan Realignments: In Voting and in Macropartisanship
   - David Mayhew’s *Electoral Realignments: A Critique of an American Genre*
3. Early Intra-Party Unity and Election Results
4. Swing Voters and Election Outcomes
5. Election Forecasting

   The 2006 Midterm Election (APSA Roundtable Presentation)

**Week 2, September 4**

Some Examples in Presidential Studies


**Week 3, September 11**

The Macro Polity I


**Week 4, September 18**

The Macro Polity II


Week 5, September 25
The Macro Polity III

*Presentations of Research Designs*

Week 6, October 2
What Explains Interelection Seat Change?

Week 7, October 9
Explaining Change in the Public’s Thermostatic Policy Mood
Has America Become More Polarized Because of Growing Income Disparity?
Has America Become More Polarized Because of Growing Religious Divide?

Week 8, October 16
Has the Class-Division of American Politics Increased and, if so, Why?
What Effects Declarations of Presidential Mandates?
Patricia Heidotting Conley, *Presidential Mandates*, chapter 4 (pp.51-76)
Week 9, October 23
Does the Economy (and Presidential Approval) Have Weaker Electoral Effects in Open Seat Presidential Races?


Fair vs. Campbell on Pollyvote at http://www.forecastingprinciples.com/Political/


Week 10, October 30
Why does Turnout Vary?


[Variation in other political activities?]
Week 11, November 6
The Legislative Effects of Divided Government

Week 12, November 13
The Occurrence of Divided Government
What Determines Presidential Support Levels in Congress?
What Affects Growth in the Size of Government?
Week 13, November 20
The Dynamics of Presidential and Congressional Job Approval Ratings


Presentations of Preliminary Findings

Week 14, November 27
Does Party Control Effect the Unemployment, Inflation, and/or Growth in the Economy?


Week 15, December 4

Does Policy affect Income Inequality?

What Explains the Frequency of Presidential Vetoes?

Final Meeting, December 11

Final Presentations (Paper due)