This course concerns the study of the scintillating field of American politics. Each week, we will cover a different topic important to the field, from the political behavior of citizens to the operation and consequences of political institutions. Given the vastness of the field, we will be unable to cover all of the major debates and topics in American politics during the course of the semester. However, we will explore a good number of fascinating and important research puzzles within the field. In doing so, we will also consider the array of different research methods and analytical approaches used within the discipline and discuss a range of classic and contemporary readings about American politics. The course should be especially helpful for those who hope to take comprehensive exams in American politics and those interested in teaching courses in the subject.

reading assignments

There are no required texts that you will need to purchase for the course. Instead, course readings will be drawn from several texts as well as journal articles. Journal articles are accessible through the library’s website, while book chapters have been placed on the library’s e-reserves. You may wish to purchase the book you review for the book review and critique assignment as well as any other texts you feel will be useful as you continue your political science pursuits.

requirements

participation (25% of your final grade)

attendance

One important prerequisite of participation is class attendance. Class attendance is vital and required.

keeping up with the readings

It is essential to read all of the assigned readings and think carefully about what you have read in advance of the class session. Frantically skimming the articles in the minutes before class begins will limit the quality of our class discussion and impede your ability to learn anything useful. Your education and our class discussion of the readings will both benefit from your careful reading of the articles as well as the time you spend in advance of class reflecting on what you have read and learned.

participating in class discussion

Beyond attending class, you will also be expected actively participate in class discussions in a thoughtful way.

discussion questions

Each week, you will be responsible for writing three questions to discuss in class that week. These questions might relate to the articles individually, cover themes engaged across different articles, or perhaps cross between that week’s topic and prior readings. Good discussion questions will be able to engage the class in careful deliberation and lively debate. You should submit your discussion questions via e-mail by midnight on the Sunday before class meets.
short papers (each is 4% of your final grade)

Throughout the course, you will be responsible for five short papers in response to a week’s readings. These response papers should be single-spaced and two pages in length. You may choose which weeks you would like to write response papers. Your response papers must be turned in before we discuss that week’s set of readings.

Papers should not summarize the readings. Instead, you should write papers that respond to the points and arguments raised in the readings – what you think about what you read, rather than recounting the details of what you read.

- This could take the form of critique – where you critique the theory or methods of the research and discuss the implications of these limitations for the authors’ findings.
- You could also suggest extensions to the points raised in the readings, suggesting questions we might ask if we pushed these arguments further.
- You could contrast a week’s readings with other theories covered in this class or other courses.
- You could discuss points of conflict between the readings, and discuss how to resolve these disagreements.

In other words, there are many ways to write a successful response paper. The best response papers will be thoughtful and focused – you should spend time thinking through your arguments and what you have to say about the readings. Papers hastily written in the hours before class will be poorly received, as will papers that are merely summaries or restatements of points raised in the readings.

book review and critique (10% of your final grade)

You will be provided with a list of selected books related to each topic covered on the syllabus. At the beginning of the semester, you will select one of these books to read and critique. When we cover that topic in class, you will present a short summary of the book to the class and engage some of the strengths and weaknesses of the text. You should also turn in a book review essay (two to four pages) on the same matters, for distribution to the rest of the class via the course website.

literature assessment paper (25% of your final grade)

Instead of a research paper for the course, your major writing assignment is to write an essay that assesses the current literature on a topic of your choosing, given instructor approval. This essay should be five to ten single spaced pages in length and is due near the end of the semester. The central goal of the paper will be to assess and summarize the research about a particular topic – to identify the central question or questions, highlight the most important literature related to the topic, and provide commentary about the strengths and weaknesses of the current research in the area. More details will be outlined on a separate handout.

final exam (20% of your final grade)

The final exam for the course is an opportunity for you to show mastery of the material covered over the course of the semester. Questions on the final exam will resemble those asked on the comprehensive exam in American politics. The final exam will be take-home and open notes.

CULearn is your friend

This syllabus, assignments, and other exciting material can be accessed on the class website on culearn.colorado.edu.
special accommodations

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit to me a letter from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. You can contact the Disability Services office for more information at www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices.

some important comments on academic integrity

- Plagiarism and other academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. If you are not familiar with the rules of citing sources in written work or what constitutes plagiarism, you should contact me or refer to the University Honor Code at www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode. Academic dishonesty will result in an F in the course and referral to the Honor Court for additional non-academic sanctions.
- All papers are expected to be original work, not previously or simultaneously handed in for credit in another course (unless prior approval of all instructors involved is obtained).

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CORE SEMINAR IN AMERICAN POLITICS

course schedule

1. Introduction
   Tuesday, August 26
   The study of American politics, approaches and methods

2. Civic engagement
   Tuesday, September 2
   Voter turnout, political participation, social capital, tolerance, deliberation.
   Who participates in politics and why do they do so? Why are some more politically tolerant than others?
3. Political psychology

**Tuesday, September 9**

*Psychology of opinion formation, citizen motivation and capabilities*

What do people know about politics? How do they organize their beliefs? How do they form opinions?


4. Public opinion

**Tuesday, September 16**

*Persuasion, opinion change, macropolitics, opinion dynamics*

What are the roots of public opinion? Why do political opinions change?


5. The news media

**Tuesday, September 23**

*Media effects, media as an institution, interactions between politicians and the press*

What drives the content of the news media? What are the consequences for news consumers?

6. Campaigns and vote choice

Tuesday, September 30
Vote choice, campaign learning and decision-making

What are the effects of campaigns? How do people decide whom to vote for? What informs vote choice?


7. Political parties

Tuesday, October 7
Party organizations, realignment, partisanship

Why do political parties form? Why do political parties rise, decline, and change over time?


8. Elections

Tuesday, October 14
Congressional elections, candidate strategy, incumbency, electoral institutions

Who runs for office and why? What explains election outcomes?

9. Representation in Congress

**Tuesday, October 21**

*Representation, legislative responsiveness to constituents*

Do politicians respond to public preferences? When and how is policy representation achieved?


10. Congress as an institution

**Tuesday, October 28**

*Congressional decision-making, effects of institutional environments*

How do members of Congress make decisions and what factors shape these choices?


11. Interest groups

**Tuesday, November 4**

*Collective action and interest group formation, interest group populations, lobbying and its effects*

Why do interest groups form? When and how do interest groups influence public policy?


12. The presidency

Tuesday, November 11

Presidential power and influence

What are the roots of presidential power? How do institutions and personalities shape decision-making?


13. Supreme Court and the judiciary

Tuesday, November 18

The role of the Supreme Court, the legal model and the attitudinal model, responsiveness to public opinion

What drives judicial decision-making?


Tuesday, November 25

Fall break – class does not meet
14. Bureaucracy

Tuesday, December 2

Bureaucratic control, congressional oversight

Are bureaucrats responsive to elected officials and the public?


15. Policy outcomes

Tuesday, December 9

Policy change, issue evolution

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