P SC 5423: Mass Politics

University of Oklahoma

Spring 2010

Thursday, 6:30 - 9:20 PM, Kaufman 319

Dr. Tyler Johnson

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Office hours: Wednesday, 1:00 PM - 3:00 PM or by appointment

Course Description

This class is an introduction to American political behavior. We will assess historical and modern debates in American politics as to why people think the way they do about issues and candidates and how the decisions individuals make affect political outcomes. Several broad topics in mass politics will be covered: the nature of mass belief systems, the ability of citizens to perform in a democratic society, the predictors of vote choice, the psychology behind vote choice, the role of the mass media and society on citizen decision making, the relationships Americans build with political actors and institutions, the changing face of participation, the evolution of aggregate public opinion, the role of candidates and information in elections, and the consequences of electoral outcomes.

Class Structure

Class time will be spent as a discussion. There will be no lectures. Graduate seminars are not spectator sports, and I expect you to be heavily involved in the conversation on a weekly basis. Please be prepared to address the following questions concerning the assigned readings:

1) What are the major questions motivating the research?
2) How are the key concepts defined?
3) What are the major theoretical perspectives that guide the debate?
4) What are the strengths and weaknesses of each conceptual definition and theoretical perspective?
5) When there is disagreement between scholars, which argument is most persuasive and why?
6) How do measurement and methodological choices change the arguments?
7) What are the principle implications of the findings for understanding American politics?

Required Texts

The following texts are available at local bookstores (as well as through online sources).

In addition, each week’s reading assignment includes several related journal articles. I reserve the right to add or subtract reading assignments as I see fit.

Expectations and Assignments

First, I expect you to come to class having read the books or articles assigned for the week and ready to discuss them. To further facilitate discussion, each week you will send me two talking points on the readings. Talking points are due to me via e-mail by 3 PM on Wednesday. Talking points should be the most interesting questions or arguments you have identified based on the week’s literature. They should refer to a specific section or sections of the readings and should be submitted in the form of a short paragraph (complete with author/page number when necessary). The quality and promptness of these talking points, along with your in-class discussion, will make up the participation portion of your final grade.

Everyone is required to complete a 15-20 page research paper. For students pursuing the M.A. or M.P.A. degree, this paper should take the form of a critical literature review assessing the state of research in a given area of political behavior. For students pursuing the Ph.D. degree, this paper should take the form of a literature review and research design for a project that could ideally become a conference paper in the future. As part of the research paper process, you must present me with a two page overview summarizing your paper plans (including the beginnings of a bibliography) to me by March 25. We will then pick a time to meet to discuss the proposal in the week following the proposal submission. Papers will be due May 13.

Finally, there will be an essay examination modeled after the American comprehensive exam. This experience will help you synthesize the different literatures discussed in the course and ideally will prepare you for future thesis writing or prelim exam taking. The exam will be take-home. It will be handed out after class on April 15 and due at the beginning of class on April 29. More specific rules regarding the exam format will be discussed in class.

Your course grade will be calculated as follows:

Participation and Talking Points 30%
Essay Examination 30%
Paper Proposal 10%
Research Paper 30%

Final class grades will be assigned as follows:
A = 89.5-100  B = 79.5-89.4  C = 69.5-79.4  D = 59.5-69.4  F = Less Than 59.5

Questions concerning grades should be dealt with during office hours. I will not discuss grades via e-mail.

Statement about Students with Disabilities

The University of Oklahoma is committed to providing reasonable accommodation for all students with disabilities. Any student in this course who has a disability that may prevent him or her from fully demonstrating his or her abilities should contact the instructor personally as soon as possible to discuss accommodations necessary to ensure full participation and facilitate your educational opportunities. Students with disabilities must be registered with the Office of Disability Services prior to receiving accommodations in this course. The Office of Disability Services is located in Goddard Health Center, Suite 166, phone 405-325-3852 or TDD only 405-325-4173.

Statement about Religious Holidays

It is the policy of the University to excuse the absences of students that result from religious observances and to provide without penalty for the rescheduling of examinations and additional required classwork that may fall on religious holidays. Please see the instructor immediately if you will need to miss class any time during this semester.

Statement about Course Materials/Copyright and Plagiarism

The handouts used in this course are copyrighted. By “handouts,” I mean all products generated for this class, which include but are not limited to syllabi, web pages, multimedia files, presentations, quizzes, exams, written assignments, and in-class material review sheets. Because these are copyrighted, you do not have the right to copy the handouts, unless I expressly grant permission. Academic misconduct includes plagiarism, cheating on exams, improper collaboration, and fraud (such as submitting the same assignment for different classes or fabricating sources). See http://www.ou.edu/provost/integrity for academic misconduct policies and http://www.ou.edu/provost/integrity-rights for information on student rights with regards to misconduct.

Plagiarized assignments will automatically be given a zero.

Course Calendar

Students are expected to have read the assigned readings before class.

Week 1  January 21: Introduction (readings not required, but recommended)

Week 2  February 4: Knowledge and Sophistication


Week 3  February 11: Partisanship


Week 4  February 18: Ideology


Week 5  February 25: Cognition, Context, and Networks


Week 6  March 4: Issues, Economics, and the Vote


**Week 7 March 11: Approval, Trust, Confidence**


**Week 8 March 18: No Class (Spring Vacation)**

**Week 9 March 25: Macro Politics**


Week 10  April 1: Media Environment


Week 11  April 8: Media Effects


Week 12  April 15: Turnout and Participation


Week 13  April 22: To Be Determined (Midwest Political Science Association conference)

Week 14  April 29: Candidates and Campaigns


Week 15  May 6: Election Outcomes and Issue Evolution


