CLASSICS IN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this seminar is to introduce the core questions, concepts, and theories of the field through the "classic" works. I developed this seminar in response to graduate students who believed that too many graduate courses in American politics had lost sight of the forest by examining the trees in too much detail (or in some cases, by putting parts of each branch and leaf under a microscope). Advanced seminars typically focus on cutting edge research and often assume the reader is familiar with the theoretical debates and underlying issues. However, most graduate students have not had the opportunity to read the original works that motivate contemporary research. This seminar will provide that opportunity. A related issue concerns the methodology employed in "classic" and current research. Many first-year students (and other advanced students who have not had statistics) have difficulty plowing through the technical work that is assigned in many American politics seminars. The onslaught of numbers, equations, and formal models from the APSR or AJPS can be pretty daunting. The classic works assigned here rarely employ any math more sophisticated than descriptive statistics or simple correlation. While I believe it is important to master the more technical approaches, a prior requirement is to understand the important theories and issues in the field.

While the primary aim of the seminar is to introduce you to the central questions and concepts in the field, we will spend some time each week developing your research skills. We will examine the methods employed by the authors, discuss whether the methods were appropriate for answering the question at hand, and determine how the methodological choices may have helped shape the research.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1) The quality of this seminar depends on participation from all of you. Everyone is expected to read the required readings by the day of the seminar and be willing and able to participate meaningfully in discussions. It is essential to have a good understanding of each reading, not only individually but also how they fit together. Before each seminar you may find it useful to write down an outline of the questions and issues that you see as central (and make sure to bring these up, even if discussion seems to be heading in a different direction).

2) You will write six short papers (two to three pages) that critically review the readings for a given week. You will not be required to do outside reading for these papers. The papers should be heavy on the critique and light on the review of the various articles and books.

3) You will be responsible for a presentation, during a week of your choice, of the research that was spawned by a given classic (or set of classics for that week). You also will be responsible for preparing an annotated bibliography for that week of the subsequent work on the topic (about 10-12 pages). Your presentation, which should be about 10-15 minutes, should outline the main directions of research, a critique of the body of work, and remaining important questions on the topic.

4) There will be a take-home final examination. We will discuss the format of the exam in class.
COURSE EVALUATION

Seminar participation is 20%, the bibliography and presentation is 20% of your grade, the short papers are 36% (6% each), and the final exam is 25% of the final grade (which adds up to 101%, but that is close enough!).

COURSE READINGS

The following books are available for purchase in the University of Wisconsin bookstore:


The other readings will be available on the course Canvas site.

COURSE OUTLINE

I. Introduction

September 9th – Studying American Politics (We will discuss the following readings in the first seminar meeting).


II. Political Institutions

A. September 16th – The President


Richard Neustadt, Presidential Power, 1960, 3-79.


B. September 23rd – Congress


C. September 30th – The Courts


D. October 7th – The Bureaucracy

Graham Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis, APSR 63:3 (September, 1969) 689-718.

III. Parties and Groups

A. October 14th – Pluralism

Federalist Paper #10.

October 21st – Pluralism and the Collective Action Problem


October 28th – Critics of Pluralism

B. November 4th – Political Parties

V.O. Key, Southern Politics, 1949, 298-311, 386-405.

C. November 11th – Partisan Realignments


D. November 18th – Race and Politics

V.O. Key, Southern Politics (1949), pp 533-54, 644-63.

IV. The Individual in Politics

A. November 25th – Voting


B. December 2nd – Participation

Harold Lasswell, Power and Personality, 1948, 20-58.

V. December 9th – Who Governs?

C. Wright Mills, "The Structure of Power in American Society," British Journal of Sociology 9:1 (May,

The week on Public Opinion had to be cut because we lost one week because of a shorter semester than the last time I taught the course! Here are the readings for those of you who are interested: