POLI 220B—Comparative Politics: Institutions

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Fall 2019

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Course description

This class investigates the origins, operation, and consequences of political institutions. Institutions are generally thought of as the “rules of the game,” within which political actors function and strategize. More pragmatically, we will be examining the structures—mostly formal—that give order to the state and everyday political life: constitutions, parliaments, political parties, electoral systems, and so forth. The class focuses on democratic institutions, but we will also consider the role played by institutions in non-democratic systems. Toward the end of the quarter, we will dip into the large literature on institutions’ social and economic effects.

The class is targeted toward PhD students in political science, and especially those preparing to take the comprehensive examination in comparative politics. While we cover significant ground, it is worth emphasizing that graduate students sitting for this exam will need to read beyond the syllabus provided here. For additional material, students should consult Professor Strom’s excellent reading list.

There are no prerequisites, although familiarity with the basic concepts of game theory and econometrics will be helpful.

Expectations and grading policy

1. Reading and participation (10%). There are five readings for each class session. Come to class prepared to discuss, critique, and defend all of the readings, and do so actively. Be willing to ask simple questions—usually others will want to know the answer too. Be respectful and wary of interrupting; don’t monopolize the discussion.

2. Presentation (15%). For at least one class in the quarter, your will be assigned to present that week’s readings. The presentation should do the following:
   - Briefly motivate the topic for that week: why does it matter?
   - Establish the principal research questions behind the assigned readings. Don’t present one question per reading; rather, gather readings together and organize the debates they speak to.
• Summarize the readings’ main claims in response to those questions. Again, draw linkages across readings wherever possible (“One set of texts addresses the moral hazard wrought by these institutional arrangements; the other set. . . ”). The goal here is to tease out the positive contributions the readings make in pushing forward the literature.
• Pinpoint some salient critiques. These may center on internal inconsistencies within a theory, flaws in research design, interpretation of results, unarticulated assumptions, scope conditions, etc. Be judicious and measured. Avoid hyperbole. Try to propose ways ahead.
• Conclude the presentation by offering four “big picture” questions to guide subsequent class discussion.
• The best presentations will lay out an incisive, analytical summary of the material, call attention to its main shortcomings, and set the agenda for the remainder of the class.

3. Writing I, II, III (75% total; 25% each). Over the quarter you will write three short exam-type papers. Some instructions:
• 48 hours before the deadline, I will email a set of questions. These will relate directly to the topics covered in the recent weeks’ class sessions.
• Pick ONE question.
• Answer that question in no more than 1,500 words.
• You should engage in depth with the relevant class readings. Citing a couple of outside readings is fine but not necessary to receive a top grade.
• There should be a thread running through the paper; it must make an argument. Use signposts to help the reader understand how each paragraph adds to the larger point you want to make. A good idea is to state your thesis very near the start of the paper (“In this paper, I argue that. . . ”).
• Bring in empirical examples, but don’t present tables, figures, or discuss cases at great length. The emphasis should usually be on grappling with the theoretical claims. In this context, cases are best used to illustrate your points instead of being a hard test of them.
• You may include up to three short footnotes; fewer is better. These are included in the word count.
• Use the Harvard citation style: “The sky is blue (Green 2012).”
• Don’t include a bibliography.
• Write the paper in LaTeX or R markdown. If you haven’t yet mastered these tools, now is the time.
• The assignments are open-book and open-note.

Academic honesty

You are expected to do your own work, and to properly attribute ideas, quotations, and sources. Please consult the university’s website on academic integrity.
Disabilities policy

Students with disabilities should please let me know of any accommodations you may need.

Email policy

I will reply to emails within two business days.
Class Schedule

Thursday, 2019-09-26—Introduction: studying institutions


Thursday, 2019-10-03—Democracy: origins & types


Thursday, 2019-10-10—Democracy: presidentialism & executives


Thursday, 2019-10-17—Democracy: legislatures & parliamentary democracy

****Assignment 1 questions released after class; answers due 48 hours later, Saturday, at 6:00pm****


**Thursday, 2019-10-24—Democracy: federalism & power sharing**


**Thursday, 2019-10-31—Democracy: electoral rules & party systems**


**Thursday, 2019-11-07—Democracy: political parties**

*****Assignment 2 questions released after class; answers due 48 hours later, Saturday, at 6:00pm*****


Thursday, 2019-11-14—Bureaucracy, markets, and law


Thursday, 2019-11-21—Non-democratic systems


Thursday, 2019-12-05—Social & economic effects of political institutions

*****Assignemnt 3 questions released after class; answers due 48 hours later, Saturday, at 6:00pm*****