Syllabus for Poli Sci 211:
Formal Models in Political Theory

(Last updated March 29, 2020)

Instructor: Sean Ingham
Course time: Mondays, 9am–11:50am
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Course description

What does it mean for public officials and citizens to respect the rule of law? What are political institutions, and how do they constrain political actors? By what mechanisms do institutional constraints become stronger or weaker or change over time? Why is it valuable to have institutions that establish the effective rule of law and constraints on public officials? These questions are the substantive focus of the seminar. Methodologically, the seminar focuses on approaches to these questions in political philosophy and social science that employ formal models.

The literature on political institutions is vast, and the goal of the seminar is not to survey the literature in a comprehensive or balanced way. The goal is instead to help students conceptualize and articulate questions about institutions with more analytical precision and sophistication, using a small sample of this larger literature as a stimulus. Each week we will drill deep into one or two articles or book chapters and reconstruct the authors’ arguments, step by step, rather than surveying the general terrain at a bird’s eye view. The focus will be on acquiring the skills needed to read and evaluate applications of game theory and formal modeling in political science, so that students can then read more widely in the literature on their own time.

Assignments and grades

Weekly problem sets and reading questions are designed to help students understand the formal models and reflect on their implications. For example, a problem set might ask the student to explain a step in an author’s proof that the author left implicit, and reading questions might ask students to assess whether the assumptions of the formal model are justified, given the role the model is supposed to play in a scholar’s argument. As part of the expectation for participation, students should be prepared to explain their answers in class during group discussions of the model.

Students are permitted to work on the problem sets in groups, but each student must write up and submit their own solutions. Students should upload their solutions to the Canvas website before each class session.

There are no penalties for late work, but I ask that you submit the problem sets on time, because we will all get more out of the class discussions if everyone has completed the problem sets and
readings on time. Students can submit revised versions of their problem sets at any point in the quarter, so it is better to submit an incomplete problem set than none at all.

The grade will be the average of students’ grades on the problem sets and participation.

**Teaching and learning during a pandemic**

The university has adopted special grading policies for the Spring 2020 quarter due to the pandemic. You have the option of taking the seminar for a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory grade, and you can switch from the letter grade option to this alternative at any point before the end of week 10, per the special university policy adopted for the Spring 2020 quarter. If you are considering this option, or unsure, please seek my advice.

For more information, see here: https://senate.ucsd.edu/COVID-19-Academic-Senate-Updates.

If at any point during the quarter you feel you are not able to meet the course expectations due to the pandemic, please discuss your situation with me so that we can make accommodations.

**Prerequisites**

Students will be assumed to have already completed either a graduate-level or advanced undergraduate-level introduction to game theory at the level of Martin Osborne’s *An Introduction to Game Theory* or Steven Tadelis’s *Game Theory: An Introduction*. If one lacks this background one should consult with the instructor before enrolling in the seminar and should be prepared to fill in the gaps in one’s understanding with additional study. We will devote the first session to a review of some game-theoretic concepts.

**Weekly Reading schedule**

We will alternate between two kinds of questions: questions about how best to understand concepts like *institution, convention, social norm, popular control, and the rule of law*, and questions about the mechanisms by which institutions constrain political actors, the mechanisms by which they change over time, how they break down and fail, and so on. We will consider how answers to the first set of questions bear on the second.

**W1** March 30. Introduction to the themes of the course; game theory refresher/primer

- Optional: Steven Tadelis, *Game Theory: An Introduction*. Chapters 10, 11, especially 11.1–11.3.

**W2** April 6. Social choice theory and the “new institutionalism”¹

¹It’s not so new anymore.


**W3** April 13. Constitutions and mass resistance to abuses of power


**W4** April 20. Democratic institutions and mass resistance


**W5** April 27. What are institutions?


**W6** May 4. The rule of law


**W7** May 11. Social norms and coordinated punishment


**W8** May 18. Institutional breakdown: executive absolutism

W9 May 27. Institutional breakdown: constitutional hardball


W10 June 1. To be determined.

Below are a few possible topics we could choose for the final week. Each would depart, to varying degrees, from the substantive focus of the previous weeks, but would broaden your knowledge of the ways in which formal models are used in political theory. I will also solicit suggestions from students.

- Popular control as a check on state power

- The concept of freedom
  - Itai Sher, “Neutral Freedom and Freedom as Control”